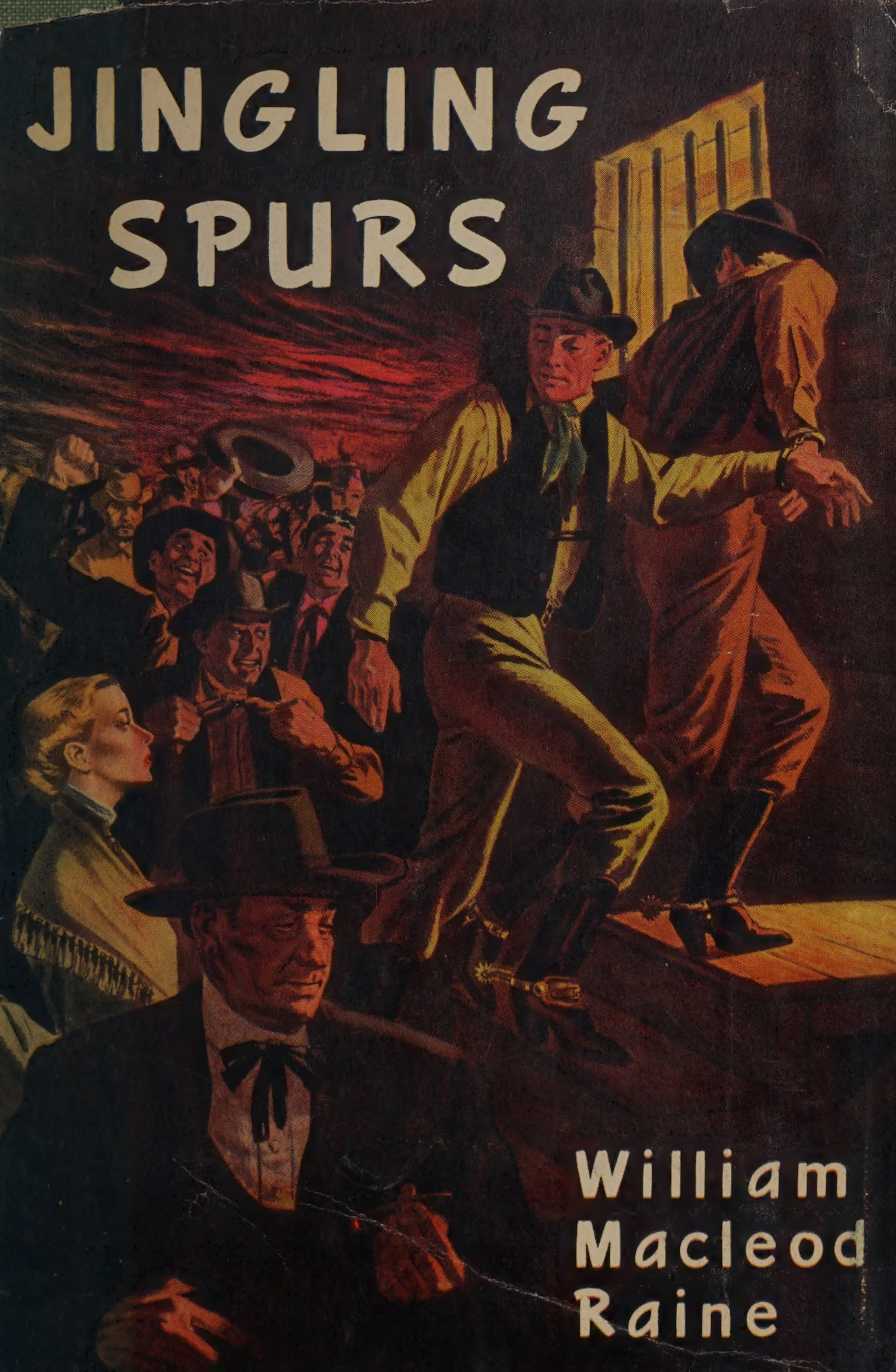
JINGLING SPURS



William Macleod Raine

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JINGLING SPURS

William MacLeod Raine

Randy Sloan was the only member of the Sloan family left to carry on the feud with Anse Cottrell. His father and his uncle had been killed in an ambush, and his brother Sumner had been "framed" and sent to the penitentiary for ten years.

The feud had lain dormant for a time. There was not much hope for the Sloan interests, for they faced also the loss of their ranch,

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JINGLING SPURS

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WHO WANTS TO LIVE FOREVER?
CLATTERING HOOFS
THIS NETTLE DANGER
THE BANDIT TRAIL
RANGER'S LUCK
JINGLING SPURS

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WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

19 51

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1

THE DAY was pleasantly warm and the spring sun wrapped Round Top in an atmosphere peaceful as old age. It was near the noon hour with nobody stirring. The only sound that broke the quiet was the bawling of fretted cattle in the stock pens at the edge of town.

Randolph Sloan rode down Main Street toward the courthouse square, his horse's hoofs flinging up at each step a spurt of dust. He sat the saddle with negligent ease, no sign in his bearing of any inner tensity. This town was enemy territory. He had been here only twice since that day six years ago when hell had broken loose and death had sent leaden messengers across the square in yellow flashes. The sight of the place brought back harrowing memories. Eight of the Sloan faction had ridden in to talk a feud peace on the invitation of Anse Cottrell. When they drew up to dismount the guns of the ambushers had blasted them. The first burst of fire had emptied three saddles. After a few sporadic shots the Sloans fled, two of them badly wounded. One of these was Randolph's father, the leader of the clan. Within a week he had died. In the battle the Cottrells had lost only one of their men. Though they did not know it, he had been killed by young Randolph, the fifteen-year-old boy riding beside his father.

The carnage of that day broke the back of the Sloan resistance. On Sumner Sloan, the oldest son, had fallen the leadership, and before he could make a move he had been arrested on a framed murder charge, tried, convicted, and sentenced to fifteen years in the penitentiary.

Randolph tied at the rail in front of Stump's New York Emporium. That he was not welcome in Round Top he knew, but he thought it unlikely that anybody would force a quarrel at this late date. Orders had been passed down from Old Anse to his followers not to start a difficulty. He was on top and he did not want any disturbance that might stir up public opinion against him. Though hatred still burned, the days of violence seemed to have passed.

A young woman came out of the little shop next door to Stump's and cut some nasturtiums. The rays of the sun slanted over Jim Wong's restaurant and spotlighted the bronze hair drawn to a severe knot at the nape of her neck. She had a tall slim figure and when for a moment her eyes rested on Sloan they were clouded with a sullen impersonal resentment. To the young man it seemed that they mirrored unhappiness.

Nora Hamilton held his attention only fleetingly, for his gaze had fallen on a sorrel at the rack carrying the Circle D brand. Dan Duff must be in town. If they met and if Duff had been drinking there might be trouble. The fellow was a quarrelsome bully always ready to fight. His testimony had helped to send Randolph's brother Sumner to the penitentiary for killing a Cottrell partisan, Joe Tappan. Since young Sloan had dismounted it was too late for him to ride on to Sanson's wagon yard. Bill Cottrell had come out of the store and was leaning against the door jamb. It would not do to show fear before him.

A flash of surprise showed in Cottrell's eyes, but neither his voice nor his manner gave evidence of hostility. " 'Lo, Randy, how's everything at Bigg's Bend?" he asked.

"Same as usual," Sloan answered. "Nothing ever happens there."

As small boys these two had gone to the same country school, but after the feud started they had had only a shooting acquaintance. It had been years since they had met.

Sloan walked into the store. A big man, bullnecked and muscle-bound, was at the counter buying a plug of tobacco. He glanced up and stiffened, the shallow stony eyes in his ugly lupine face fastened on Randolph. No coat covered his thick body and beneath the open shirt a tangle of matted hair showed.

"Who said you might come to this town?" he demanded. The man was wearing plain shiny leather chaps with a pocket on the right leg from which projected the butt of a revolver.

The stomach muscles of Sloan tightened. Before he answered he beat down the flame of rage that choked him. Toward this man he felt a deep hatred. Not only had he lied Sumner into prison; common report had it that he had shot down from ambush their uncle Tracy Sloan. But Randolph had strong reasons for not reviving dormant warfare. He was pulling all the strings he had to get his brother pardoned and there would be no chance if active trouble flared again.

"I hope you don't mind, Mr. Duff," he said evenly. "I'm here on business for only a short visit."

"Nobody minds," Cottrell cut in quickly. "There's no dead line against you. All is quiet on the Potomac these days."

"That's fine," Sloan answered with a faint flavor of irony.

"See you make yore visit damn short," Duff growled. He was a notorious barroom brawler and he would have liked to beat up this young chap but he remembered orders from Dave to curb his hair-trigger temper.

Sloan moved past the ruffian to talk with Asa Stump. The storekeeper had a ranch near town and wanted to buy a young bull from the Bigg's Bend ranch. They discussed the matter and agreed on a price.

Duff flatfooted to the doorway and waited there.

Bill Cottrell watched him anxiously. You could never tell when Duff would break loose. "Dad is expecting us," Bill suggested. "We had better get going, Dan."

"Do him good to expect a while," Duff jeered. "Anse ain't God Almighty. And don't tell me what to do, young fellow."

His huge body filled the doorway. "If I might pass," Sloan suggested.

Duff did not move and Sloan brushed through the small space left.

"Look out who you are pushin' around," Duff snarled. "I've a mind to beat yore head off."

Randolph's self-control slipped a notch. He gave the bad man a whitetoothed mocking smile and drawled, "I can't move off the earth for you."

It was all Duff's explosive temper needed. He jumped for Sloan fast. His big hard fist lashed out and caught the young man on the chin. Randolph went down like a ninepin. The shock of the blow stunned him. Duff kicked him savagely in the ribs while Cottrell tried to drag him away.

A young woman flew down the garden path from the small shop, in her hands a pair of scissors and a shirtwaist she was making. As the heavy boot thudded against the body of the prostrate man she cried, "Stop it, you brute." Duff did not see or hear her. His whole attention was absorbed in the tigerish attempt to destroy this enemy.

Bill Cottrell slid his arm under the fellow's chin and heaved backward. "You'll kill him, you fool," he cried.

Duff struggled to free himself. His huge arm swung in a half-circle and flung Bill aside. To his surprise Nora Hamilton confronted him. "Out of my way," he ordered, and plunged forward.

The girl raised her arm sharply to protect herself and the man's rush drove the scissors deep into his shoulder. A spurt of blood stained the cotton shirt. He let out a roar of pain and rage. Before he could move he went down like an axed ox. Cottrell had slammed the barrel of a .45 against the side of his head.

"What have I done?" Nora cried, fear in her eyes.

"Saved a man's life probably," Cottrell answered. "Dan had gone crazy." He stooped and drew the revolver from the pocket in the big man's chaps. "When he gets mad he hasn't the sense of a jackrabbit."

Sloan tried to rise and could not make it. Bill gave him a hand up. He swayed dizzily on his feet.

"I'm a little shaky yet," he said, and added with a thin smile. "Kindness of the Cottrells."

Bill flushed angrily. "We hadn't a thing to do with this. We are not responsible for this maniac."

Miss Hamilton suggested that Sloan had better come into the shop and rest for a few minutes. Randolph's eyes swept up her long slender body to a face of fine bone structure, one neither pretty nor warm with feminine softness. There was bitterness in it one so young ought not to feel. The offer had been made coldly but Sloan accepted it. An interest more than curiosity stirred in him.

"I'm obliged, miss," he said. "It will give me a chance to thank you."

"Not necessary," she returned stiffly. "He ran on the scissors himself."

Cottrell offered advice. He was a dark well-built young fellow, plainly disturbed at what had occurred. "Better move into the house. Dan is coming to and he'll be sore as a wounded bear with cubs."

"Then get him away from here," Sloan answered curtly.

7

The shop was set back from the line of ugly false-fronted stores on the square. On either side of the path were cultivated beds of roses, jonquils, and pansies. A trellis covered by a morning-glory vine protected the porch from the summer sun. The editor of the Round Top *News* had once in a poetic mood dubbed this the Store Beautiful. That was before the rumor had spread that Miss Hamilton had settled here to escape a past of ill repute.

Every step Randolph took sent pains shooting through his battered body. When they passed into the house Nora pushed a chair toward him.

"Sit down," she snapped.

"After you," he said, smiling.

Her retort was blunt. "This is not a social call, sir. I do not know you, nor do I want to."

"Short if not sweet," he replied. "But you can't save a man's life and refuse to let him thank you."

"I explained that. The reason I raised the scissors was to keep him from hitting me."

"Was that why you ran down the path to prevent him from kicking the life out of me?" he asked.

"I ought to have known better than to interfere in a drunken quarrel," she told him, an edge to her voice. She did not like his assurance, and she wanted him to understand that there was no tie between them, that what she had done could be rubbed off the slate. "If he had been kicking a dog I would have done the same."

Sloan was puzzled at her hostility. One possible reason for it came to his mind. "Are you a friend of the Cottrells?" he inquired.

"I am a friend of nobody in this town," she said bleakly, her lips a tight thin line across the inflexible face.

His eyes swept the room which was apparently both a store for women's supplies and a dressmaker's shop. There were dress goods, hats, sheets, towels, and sundries; and there was a dummy form with a partially made frock draping it.

"Can you do business without making friends?" He put the question lightly.

"That is my affair, sir."

"And not mine. Quite right."

He caught at the arm of the chair to steady himself. His body swayed. Thinking he was about to fall, she moved swiftly to put an arm around him. He sank into the chair and grinned up.

"May I say thanks this time?" he wanted to know.

Angry color swept her face. He had tricked her.

Sloan went on without waiting for an answer. "We have one thing in common. I haven't many friends in this town either. You saw what just took place."

"Are you one of the Sloans?" she flung at him.

"Correct. Randolph Sloan. Three of my kin were killed within a hundred feet of here."

"Then why do you come back?"

"On business."

"More important business than staying alive?" she demanded sharply. In spite of herself his personality impinged itself on her. His clothes were worn and travel-stained. Jean trousers that had seen better days covered his long legs, the ends thrust into the tops of scuffed and dusty boots. Many washings had taken the pattern out of the cotton shirt and the wide-brimmed hat had grown floppy with age. But she knew he was no shiftless nester down on his luck. The bone conformation of his face showed strength entirely masculine. The set of his shoulders advertised a driving force in the man and the ease of his bearing told of reflexes well-balanced. After hours of desert riding he still looked clean.

"A man can't run away from fools like Duff," he said.

Already she repented the momentary concern she had showed about his safety. She lifted her shoulders in a slight shrug.

"You are a newcomer here, aren't you?" he suggested. "I have not seen you before."

Her short "Yes" invited no further inquiries. But the woman had aroused an interest in him. Her head was beautifully modeled and in all her movements there was a supple grace. It was written on her that she had character. She could not be more than twenty-one or -two, but he would have hazarded a bet that she had never had much fun. Life, he guessed, had mauled her a good deal. The simplicity of her dress was almost austere. It conveyed the impression that she had schooled herself to renunciation.

"You are trying to shut yourself away from life," he said. "Do you ever go to the schoolhouse dances?"

"As soon as you are fit to go you had better travel," she told him.

It came to Sloan that her tawny eyes, flecked with gold, would be lovely if she would let any warmth of feeling into them.

"All work and no play makes Nora a dull life," he said, ignoring her hint.

"You are presumptuous, sir. I do not need advice from a stranger."

Though he knew she was annoyed, he would not give up. "That's right, ma'am. We haven't been introduced. Maybe I can fix that."

He walked to the door. His gaze shuttled right and left, resting on an old man hobbling along the sidewalk. Where the path met the sidewalk Randolph intercepted him. " 'Lo, Matt, how you doing? You're looking fine. Do you know the young lady who runs this store?"

"Miss Nora Hamilton — sure." Matt Chunn slanted a wrinkled face at Sloan. "What in Mexico you doing in this town? Ain't you got a lick of sense?"

"Got to see the elephant once in a while. Glad to meet you." He tucked an arm under the old-timer's elbow and guided him up the path.

"Where we going, fellow?" Matt sputtered, hanging back. "What's eatin' you?"

"We're two young buckaroos calling on a lady. I want you to introduce me."

Matt's leathery face took on an impish delight. "Sure I'll give you a knockdown to her. By gravy, I'll fix you up fine."

To the girl Matt spoke his piece in a high-pitched falsetto. "Miss Nora, this scalawag wants to meet you. His name is Randy Sloan and he is a sure enough hell-poppin' son of a gun who doesn't know sic' 'em. The Cottrells are liable to wind up his ball of yarn sudden if he don't cut back to his own reservation. Most of the time he's in trouble up to his hocks — busts laws and goes whammin' around like he was the Czar of Rooshia. A plumb lunkhead, and no more safe for a young lady than a stick of dynamite at the end of a fuse. You tell him to light a shuck outa here or he'll git planted in the boneyard."

"Thank you, Matt, for the wholehearted endorsement," Sloan chuckled. "You hit on only the high spots of my merits but Miss Hamilton will discover the others in time. I'm obliged for the send-off."

"Don't mention it. A rapscallion like you needs a lift." Chunn limped out of the store well pleased with himself.

Randolph sat down astride a chair, his arms resting on the back. "You see how much my friends think of me, Miss Nora. Now we have been properly introduced we'll take up where we left off. About the schoolhouse dance next Saturday. May I have the pleasure of accompanying you?"

Her eyes sparked angrily. "I think you are the most inpudent man I ever met," she said.

"Don't confuse impudence with ardor," he begged, mischief in his eyes. "You know what that poet chap said about a guy's desert being small if he didn't have the nerve to carry through. We both need a little bucking up."

She cut him off abruptly. "Here is your hat, Mr. Sloan."

The door opened and a young woman walked into the shop. At sight of them she stopped uncertainly near the entrance. A faint color streamed through Nora's cheeks. Since coming to the town she had cut herself off from meeting men.

The new arrival recognized Sloan and ignored him. She was Julia Cottrell, a daughter of Old Anse, the most lovely and disturbing girl in the county.

In a voice low-pitched and husky she said to Nora, "I came to see if you are ready to give me a fitting for the dress."

"Not quite, but I am glad you came. I am not sure how you want the ruffles."

The two young women discussed details about the dress. Presently Nora explained the presence of Randolph Sloan, that he had been attacked by a ruffian and knocked unconscious.

Julia Cottrell looked at Sloan arrogantly, her scornful gaze sweeping over his old and worn attire. The power of her family and her own good looks combined with natural wilfulness had built up in her an insolence seldom challenged. She resented his amused smile and wanted to put him in his place.

He said, with a touch of irony, "Don't take the trouble to introduce us, Miss Hamilton. We are old schoolmates. I have had many kindnesses from her family."

Julia lost her temper. "What is he doing here, Nora? He's a bad lot. You ought not to know him. If he has come begging give him this."

She took a dollar from her purse and pushed it along the counter toward him.

The dressmaker was shocked. That Sloan was a proud man she knew. The muscles in his jaw tightened and stood out like ropes and then slowly relaxed.

Sloan stepped forward and weighed the silver piece in his hand. He looked down at it lying in his brown palm and shook his head. "No, I can't take it." His eyes met the stormy ones of Julia. "If I did it would break the heart of Old Anse. A dollar means more to him than his right eye." He tossed the dollar back to Julia and turned to Nora. "Taking up unfinished business, what about the Saturday night dance?" he asked.

Until the past minute there had been no doubt in Nora's mind. She had not even considered going with him. But after all he had meant to be friendly and Julia's insult to him had put her on his side.

"Are you sure you want to take me?" she asked.

"Dead sure."

"Then I'll go, if you don't change your mind."

"I'm a Rock of Gibralter," he said. "Bully for you."

Without glancing at Julia he walked out of the shop. The eyes of both women followed him. Neither of them thought of his old clothes but of the force they covered. In spite of what he wore Sloan gave an impression of clean strength. The broad shoulders, the flat back with its rippling muscles, the light tread smooth as that of a panther, belonged to a man unafraid, one master of himself. His reckless feet might have trodden wild and perhaps crooked trails, but it was not likely that when danger jumped up at him the cold wind of fear would unnerve him.

"Why did you say you would go to the dance with him?" Julia asked, and immediately answered her own question. "It was because you thought I was insulting."

"I'm not fighting his battles," Nora answered coldly. "Perhaps I accepted because I remembered that he has no more friends in this town than I have."

"You act as if you don't want friends. You keep to yourself — never go to church or any socials. What can you expect?"

"I expect nothing. I go my own way."

Nora did not mention that the only people in Round Top — except Julia herself and old Matt Chunn — who had shown any interest in her were men who sneaked around after dark hoping the rumors of her past were true and departed disappointed without getting into the house.

"He won't be welcome at the dance," Julia pointed out.

"Neither shall I," Nora said dryly. "So that makes it even."

Julia dropped the subject. Further conversation was about the dress.

2

SLOAN sauntered down the street, apparently at ease with the world but watchful as a cat on the prowl. He turned in at the bank and greeted the manager with a cheerful, "Nice to see you, Mr. Webber."

Brad Webber was a heavy-set middle-aged man who looked more like a prosperous rancher than a banker. He had been a friend of Randolph's father and felt a sympathy for this youngster who was a victim of a feud he had inherited. He did not feel happy about the news he would have to give him.

"Heard anything more about the railroad route?" Randolph presently asked.

"You're hipped on that railroad, son," Webber told him with a smile. "I 'most rode a horse to death twenty years ago to get here before the railroad and it's not here yet. Might never come. You can't tell what those big moguls on Wall Street will do, but you can be pretty sure it won't be what you expect."

"It's coming sure. The mines at Chrysolite are so rich they've got to contact them."

"The line might by-pass us and cross the mountains at Federal Notch," Webber suggested.

"Choosing a stiff grade instead of an easy one. Not a chance."

"Or it might run along the flat ten miles from Bigg's Bend."

"Not unless you figure them crazy. The engineers stayed on our ranch ten days. I listened to them talk. Right on my property where the Soggy makes its bend is the only available water for fifty miles. The river is never dry."

"The right of way could hit the Soggy somewhere else."

"Where? The river comes out of the mountains there and cuts back into the foothills. To miss us the line would have to build two expensive bridges and spend a lot of money on grades it can easily avoid. There won't only be a station at Bigg's Bend; there will be a division point with a roundhouse and machine shops. That means a town. It has to be that way."

"Maybe you're right. I hope so."

"If not, I'm busted. As you know we are land poor, having bought up all the land surrounding our place."

"You're too bullheaded, Randy. I warned you to go slow." The banker hesitated, then plumped out the bad news. "Fact is, I've got to ask you to clear up your notes as they fall due. The first comes up next month."

"But why?" Sloan protested. "I'm paying the interest on the dot. I can't possibly pay now. Why not renew?"

"Anse Cottrell owns the bank. I've lost control of it. He says you are a bad risk."

Sloan's heart sank. He knew that Cottrell must have bought into the bank to ruin him, and also because he too was of opinion that Bigg's Bend would be an important place on the right of way. If he forced a foreclosure the ranch would be his. It stood out like a sore thumb that unless Sloan could raise three thousand dollars within thirty days Old Anse would step in and take possession. This was a blow that jolted Randolph. The ranch had been developed by his father and Randy had been born and brought up on it.

Before leaving the bank the young man asked Webber about Nora Hamilton. Webber was no gossip. He chose his words carefully.

"The story is that she was involved in a killing in Nebraska, that her brother is in the penitentiary there for shooting a man on account of her. His defence was that the man had ruined his sister. I am afraid our ladies have not been kind to her."

"It must be shocking to them for anybody connected with a killing to come to live in this pure town," Randolph said dryly. "Naturally they would treat her as if she had the smallpox."

In the succeeding days when Randolph was riding the range both of the young women he had met were a good deal on his mind. It might not be wise for him to attend the Round Top dance, or it might be a good move. In spite of his youth he was the leader of all the cousins and "in-laws" banded against the Cottrells. Many of the town people must resent the domination of Old Anse. It might be useful to re-establish a friendly relation with them if he could.

3

AS RANDY SLOAN shaved and dressed he thought perhaps he had not been wise in dating Nora Hamilton for the dance. Though the feud was tacitly assumed to be over, some of the younger buckaroos associated with the Cottrells, especially if they chanced to be roostered, might resent his presence and take it as a challenge.

The feud had died down because there were not enough of the Sloan faction left to keep it alive. Tracy Sloan had been ambushed. His brother Randolph, father of Randy, had died of a lingering illness following a wound. Sumner was in the penitentiary. That left only young Randolph of the immediate family. There were a dozen in-laws, but deprived of a leader they were ready to give up a losing fight. Yet young Sloan felt that one day trouble would flare up again. There was too much suppressed bitterness not to explode sometime.

When he swung into the saddle the afternoon sun was halfway down to the wine-red porphyry mountains and the foothills were one great splash of yellow poppies. It was the flowering season of the desert. The long greenleaved ocotilla were crowned at the top with lovely scarlet flowers, the bisnaga bloomed with bright orange, and the prickly pear and the mesquite flung out their flags of color. While Round Top was still miles distant the crotches of the sierras were lakes of rose and saffron which after the sun set faded to violet and later to purple.

Sloan was sensitive to beauty and he loved the thousand changing aspects of the desert, its enchanted mesas at break of day and the velvet mystery of night that softened its harshness.

The lights of the little town were on before he drew up at the square.

Nora was dressed for the party when she let him in. He noticed that she did not close the door after him. She was one woman in Round Top who could not afford to be indiscreet.

There was a change in Miss Hamilton. She had dressed her hair less severely and looked younger. Instead of the plain black dress she was wearing a flowered challis with flaring skirt. Though she still was not pretty, she carried her slender body with a poised grace that gave her distinction.

"So you didn't change your mind," she said.

"No. Why should I?"

She asked bluntly, color stirring in her cheeks, "Do you know what they are saying about me?"

"Does it matter?" he replied lightly.

"It matters to me. You took me by surprise. I'm not sure I should let you take me. What have you heard?"

He had heard nothing definite and he said so.

"Then go out and ask the first man you meet what kind of woman I am," she told him sharply.

"He wouldn't know. All he could give me is gossip."

"Go ask him anyhow."

He saw she meant it. "Oh come, I can't do that," he protested. "I don't care what they say. You have character."

"You may care after you know." She said, steel in her eyes. "I've decided not to go to the dance."

Randolph shook his head, smiling at her. "You can't do that, after I have put on my Sunday-go-to-meetings and ridden twelve miles. If I must I'll go get somebody to slander you."

"You'll have no trouble finding someone," she assured him, her voice faintly bitter.

"I don't like it. Understand that, please. How do you suppose I feel asking some stranger whether the girl I dated to go to a dance with me is good enough for me?" He added dryly, "For me, with such a spotless reputation."

"Maybe you had better choose the alternative."

He shook his head. "No, I've got my neck bowed. I'll be back very soon, Miss Hamilton."

Except for some men standing outside a saloon the street was deserted. Sloan's roving glance picked up some lights from houses in a poor street leading from the square. He recalled that Matt Chunn lived in a cabin on a lot back from the road. In spite of his sharp tongue Matt was a good old scout, and he was always ready to gossip.

His knock brought the old man to the door. He had a corncob pipe in his hand. His inseperable friend Buck Myers was sitting in one of two chairs at the table. They spent their time arguing and spatting over any subject that came up.

"By gorry, it's you again," Matt yelped. "Who'd' you want me to introduce you to now?"

"Can't I drop in and say howdy to an old friend?" Randy asked.

"Hmp! You can't fool me. You got something up yore sleeve. Come in and sit down." He waved a hand at the bed. "Mebbe you got along with Miss Nora so well you want me to stand up with you at yore wedding." The old fellow tittered at his own wit.

"Not yet." Sloan sat on the bed, rolled and lit a cigarette. "But she is certainly a nice young lady. I'm pleased to have met her."

Buck Myers snorted.

Matt turned on him sharply. "What's eatin' you, you slabsided old vinegaroon?" he demanded.

"Me? Why, nothing."

"Then what you grinnin' at like a ringtailed monkey? If you got anything to say against Miss Nora let's hear you spit it out."

Sloan sat back and waited. He was about to get information. These two old spitfires always took opposite sides on any opinion offered.

"I ain't got a thing to say," Buck retorted. "But there's plenty of folks has. Some of 'em claims she shot her husband back in Nebrasky."

"That ain't the story," shrilled Matt. "What they claim is a fellow she used to keep company with killed her brother, and likely 'taint so."

"Bet yore boots it ain't so," Buck flung back at him. "I never knew you to git a story right yet, you old donker. By some folks way of it, the husband up and shot her lover right spang through the heart."

"Any evidence, outside of a lot of clacking tongues?" Sloan inquired.

"A drummer passed through here and sold her a bill of goods," Matt contributed. "Seems he suspicioned her because he had seen her picture in the paper somewheres back in Nebrasky. He had heard tell the woman had moved west. When he asked her where she had come from she shut him up quick."

"Seems she had changed her name," Buck added.

Sloan rose and tossed his cigarette into the fireplace. "She certainly ought to be hanged on that evidence," he commented. "And she changed her name. Terrible! I reckon there aren't more than twenty men in this county who got here three jumps ahead of a sheriff and changed their names."

"It's different with a man," Buck said. "A young fellow full of spit and vinegar is expected to hell around some."

"That's right." Sloan's gaze rested contemplatively on Buck. "I don't remember ever having heard what your name was before you changed it."

Buck swelled up like a turkey gobbler. "And that ain't but half of it. You ain't a-goin' to hear either."

At the door Sloan turned. "You've probably forgot the old one by this time," he said, and went out laughing.

Nora turned to face him as he walked into the shop. She waited for him to speak first, standing straight and still except for the firm breasts lifting beneath the close-fitting dress. Her hard eyes challenged his verdict. He thought, *There is a great quiet pride in this woman.*

"Well, I've been sitting in at a regular sewing-circle gab fest," he told her, his smile warm and friendly. "I've heard a lot about you, most of it not true. If you are ready we'll go now."

Her gaze held fast to his. "Who did you see?" she asked. He might have walked around alone for a time and come back without meeting anybody.

"I dropped in on Matt Chunn. Buck Myers was there with him. They gave me an earful. You're a right desperate character."

"Please," she remonstrated. "It isn't anything to laugh about."

"No, nor to cry about either. I'll say one thing. Facts in themselves never tell the truth. That lies inside the souls of people. Look. Before I was fifteen I killed a man right on this court-house square. My father was down — wounded. I did it to save him. Does that make me a murderer?"

"No, not unless ——"

"We were attacked — ambushed. Nobody except you and my brother in prison knows the bullet came from my rifle. It was in a clan battle. If the Cottrells should learn I fired the gun I would probably be killed."

"I have forgotten you told me," she said, her eyes no longer stern.

"I was a wild young devil full of hate," he continued. "Whatever you have done is no worse than my sins. Why should I judge you, a good woman no matter what the facts say?"

She bit her lips, to keep from showing any weakness. Her emotions had been so long pent up within her that his understanding touched her closely. "You are generous," she said.

"Nonsense. I just try not to be a narrow fool. What are we waiting for? Let's go."

4

RANDOLPH SLOAN and Nora Hamilton wound their way among a litter of desks that had been carried into the yard from the schoolroom to clear a space for the dancers. They could hear the shuffling of feet and the singsong voice of the caller that indicated a quadrille was on the floor. Before they reached the house it came to an end with the caller's shout, "Take yore pardners — you know where."

Through a cluster of boys and bashful young men hanging around the door they passed from the entry into the room. Their arrival made a stir. Behind their palmleaf fans women whispered to one another. Men stared, surprised. It was a community dance, but since these two did not share in the town life their presence was unexpected.

Sloan's eyes traveled around the room cool and undisturbed. Most of those here had nothing against him, but in the faces of a dozen or more he read hostility. The Cottrells and their kin were represented in force. They took the presence of a Sloan as an impudent and defiant gesture.

The benches placed along the walls were filled with the couples who had just been dancing and the older women who took the floor only occasionally.

Julia Cottrell was sitting beside Duffy Suggs, a pimply-faced boy of eighteen. She was wearing the dress Nora had just made for her. It was a little daring for the time and place. The neckline was low and below it the tight-fitting bodice stressed the outlines of the breasts. She seemed so insolently sure of herself that it justified the choice, made her loveliness stand out unchallenged. Sloan thought, *She is brilliant and vivid as the desert flowers, and like those plants she carries a thorn that can leave a wound.*

There was room on the bench where she sat for at least one and perhaps two more. Randolph led Nora across the floor toward the vacant space. His gaze met the eyes of Julia bright with mocking lights.

She took the initiative swiftly. "There is room for you here, Nora."

Young Suggs was sitting at the end of the bench. After Nora was seated her escort said cheerfully, "Push over, Duffy, unless you have homesteaded the whole bench."

Duffy moved grudgingly toward Julia. He did not like to be told what to do by a Sloan, but he had not yet acquired the poise to stand out against the older man's cool assurance. Randolph took the three inches and pressured it into six.

"You look lovely in your dress," Nora told Julia.

"You bet," Duffy said, blushing at his audacity. "In any dress."

"Unanimous vote," Randolph agreed.

Julia fanned herself languidly. "It's going to be hot," she mentioned. "Too many people here."

"It would be a good idea if some of the ladies would leave their children at home," Sloan suggested.

"I wasn't thinking of the children," Julia said tartly.

A big well-dressed man, intensely masculine, strolled through the crowd and asked Julia for the next waltz. He wore a Prince Albert coat and custom-made boots well polished. Miss Cottrell introduced him to Nora and Duffy. He was John Bancroft, manager of the Sure Fire mine at Chrysolite. He had the manner of a man who knew large cities and the ways of society. A moment later the fiddlers struck up the music and Julia was sailing across the floor with him.

Randolph said to Nora, "Shall we dance?"

To his surprise he discovered that she waltzed very well. She told him, after a turn or two around the room, "We ought not to have come. They don't want us here."

"You can't get off the earth because somebody doesn't like you," he demurred.

"No, but — I'm afraid you may have trouble."

"Not likely. I'm tolerated, just." He explained mordantly. "Like a rattler with its fangs drawn."

The floor was not crowded. A good many of those present did not know how to dance anything but the squares. Randolph observed that Bancroft swung his partner around to look over her shoulder at him. Evidently Julia had been telling the man about the Sloans. His cold hard eyes were studying him. The Bigg's Bend ranchman had heard of Bancroft. He was doing a good job at the Sure Fire, which was in bonanza since he had taken charge of the property. Anse Cottrell did the ore freighting for the mine. That might explain why he and Julia appeared to be such good friends.

Sloan and Miss Hamilton did not join in the quadrilles or the Virginia Reel. He did not want to run the risk of having his partner snubbed. But when a polka was announced they danced again.

Julia stood up for the next quadrille with Duffy Suggs. Sloan watched her going through the figures. She was very gay and lively. Nora's eyes were also on her.

"Yes, she is very lovely," the young woman said, speaking to her companion's unspoken thoughts.

Randolph's gaze came back to her. He grinned. "Caught out," he admitted. "I expect she is a vixen, but she is sure a stunning one."

"It would be surprising if she wasn't spoiled a little, so vivid and so beautiful, with all her kin doting on her."

After the square was over Duffy Suggs came to ask Nora for a waltz. She said, with no enthusiasm, "That will be nice." She knew that Julia had sent him. He would never have come without being spurred to it.

When he was left alone Sloan's eyes moved as if drawn by a magnet to Julia Cottrell. For a wonder she was not dancing. A reckless impulse stirred in him. He rose and circled around the couples on the floor.

"May I have the pleasure, Miss Cottrell?" he asked, imps of deviltry in his eyes.

The audacity of it struck her dumb for a moment. She searched for words with which to punish him. Color ran through her cheeks, as her eyes held to his. A wildness began to rise in her, a queer emotion she had never known before. There was some quality in this man that was dangerous, something that appealed to her own adventurous spirit. She knew she ought to send him about his business, but she was a law to herself.

Without a word she rose and he took her in his arms. She was light as a feather on her feet and responded instinctively to his lead. Everybody watched them, aware of this dramatic moment when the last of the Sloans and the pride of the Cottrells were fused into a rhythmic unity. After this, anything was possible.

Bill Cottrell broke the spell. He moved swiftly to the raised platform on which the musicians sat and whispered in the ear of one. The fiddle bows stopped, left the dancers standing on the floor. Sloan walked with Julia to her seat. She looked at him, anger flaring to her eyes.

"Don't ever speak to me again," she ordered.

Her fury was both at him and at herself. How had he dared do such a thing? And why had she yielded to the idiotic urge that had swept over her? What she had done was outrageous. Her father would have plenty to say about it.

Sloan bowed and turned away to join Nora. Bill Cottrell crossed the floor and glared at his sister.

"You've played Ned," he said. "Haven't you a lick of sense?"

"I thought you and the rest of the family were through shooting at him," she retorted hotly. "If we are to begin loving our enemies it is time to give a public demonstration of it."

They were twins and he understood her moods better than most of the family. Her sarcasm was a reaction from the capricious willfullness that for a moment had led her to ignore the feud and all its dreadful consequences. In a less spectacular way he had felt the same impulsion. It was hard for him to keep warm any hatred against Randy Sloan.

"The old man will cuss you out * to a fare you well," he predicted. "And by heck you deserve it. Lucky you are a girl. If I had gone that far he would wear me to a frazzle."

There was a commotion in the entry — raised voices and the sound of a scuffle. Out of the group a man broke. He was Dan Duff, and it was plain he had been drinking. The fellow lurched forward a step or two and stopped. His eyes ranged over the room and found Randolph Sloan.

"I heard there was company here buttin' in when not invited," he yelped. "So I drapped in to do the bouncin' out."

He took from his head the wide-brimmed black hat and sent it sliding across the floor to the feet of the Bigg's Bend rancher. "I can whale the stuffin' outa any damn Sloan who picks that up," he boasted.

Sloan broke a moment of heavy silence. His glance

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* To "cuss one out" involved no profanity but meant only a severe scolding.

shifted from the hat to the drunken bully. "No takers, Mr. Duff," he said low and clear. "This is a dance and not a barroom."

"Tryin' to duck outa trouble," Duff jeered. "Well, it don't buy you a thing. I aim to clean up on you right now." He straddled forward, but did not get more than a few steps. Men closed in on him from all sides. Bill Cottrell slipped the six-shooter from the holster at the disturber's hip. There was a huddle of threshing men shifting violently as Duff fought to free himself. He broke loose and Bill Cottrell tapped him on the head with the barrel of his own revolver. The big body of the man sagged and went down.

"Haul him out," Bill directed. "Take him to the hotel and let him sleep it off."

He was dragged out of the schoolhouse. Those inside could hear him protesting angrily as he was being taken away. "Turn me loose and gimme my gun," he shouted. "I'll make that false alarm go climb a tree."

"Don't get on the prod, Dan," a soothing voice answered. "You showed him up plenty. We'll turn the six-shooter over to you when we get to the hotel. What you need is a nice sleep."

"We'd better go," Nora said to Sloan. "This is no place for us."

"After the next dance," he consented. "We mustn't slink out as if we had been whipped."

He chatted cheerfully, ignoring everybody but her. She played up to him and when they danced seemed wholly absorbed in what he was saying. The tawny eyes lifted to his were warm and bright. It was not entirely pretense. They were for the moment two against the world and her valiant youth joined his to face the wave of disapproval beating on them.

As they walked back to her home wrapped in the soft southern night he said with a laugh, "They noticed we were there."

"We ought not to have been," she replied.

"You're not sorry, are you?"

"No-o, I don't think so — if it doesn't bring trouble to you." She added irrelevantly, "You and Julia danced beautifully together."

"Miss Nora Hamilton and I didn't do so badly together," he mentioned.

"It was fun. I thought I had forgotten how to waltz. It has been years since —— " She did not finish the sentence. Sloan knew her thought had reverted to the tragedy that had engulfed her youth.

"You needed a jolt — to remind you that you are young and have to live in the present."

She shook her head. "I don't feel young — not like Julia. She isn't afraid of life."

"It hasn't hammered her yet. She still feels invincible."

"Yes." They turned in at the garden path leading to her house. Her eyes considered the gay insouciance of this man who had been hammered but not defeated. "Do you always do whatever you want to do?" she asked.

"What have you in mind?" he inquired, smiling at her.

"Under the circumstances a more discreet man might have hesitated to ask Julia to dance with him."

"A crazy idea," he admitted. "I get them sometimes."

"You had two tonight. The first one was taking me to the dance."

"I call that very sensible. I have made a friend."

"You must not come to see me again. Good night, Mr. Sloan."

From the courthouse a shot crashed. The bullet ripped through a panel of the door after lifting Sloan's hat from his head.

He flung the door open and said, "Get in." He scooped up the hat and followed her swiftly into the house as a second shot racketed across the square. After slamming the door to, his fingers found a bolt and pushed it home in the groove.

"You're not hit?" he demanded, and edged her back from in front of the door.

"No, I'm f-frightened," she replied.

Her fingers gripped his coat. In the darkness he felt her body trembling close to his. He put an arm around her.

"The fireworks are all over," he told her by way of comfort. "You're quite safe now."

"Won't they try to break in?" Her voice quavered. He made out her white face shining in the gloom.

"No. That slug was sent to my address — both of them. Assassins are cowards. He is legging it for safety by this time."

"Was it that man Duff?" she asked shakily.

"I think so. Have you a gun of any kind? I'm not armed."

"A small pistol. You believe he is still there."

"No. But there is a chance he is waiting for me. I'll take the pistol and go out the back door."

"Don't go yet," she pleaded. "He might — he might ——" What she feared was implicit in her unfinished sentence. Her anxiety was more for him than herself.

It had been his intention to slip down the alley and return between two buildings to the square in the hope of discovering who his would-be killer was. Reluctantly he gave this up. He could not leave Nora while she was still so terrified.

"Don't worry," he told her. "Whoever did this has nothing against you. He won't bother you any more. But there is one thing you can do for me. See Julia Cottrell tomorrow and tell her what happened. Ask her to go to her father about it. Old Anse claims he is for peace and I reckon that's so. He hasn't a thing to gain if more trouble starts. Likely he'll read the riot act to Duff. He can't afford to have talk going around that his men are shooting at women."

"Will this Duff do what Mr. Cottrell tells him?"

"Probably. He was drunk tonight."

"I suppose Mr. Cottrell will get him to sign the pledge never to drink again," Nora said dryly.

"It would be something to see Dan Duff preaching temperance," Sloan agreed.

They sat in the darkness for twenty minutes. Nora was still nervous, but he made light of her fears. It was an adventure she would always remember, he told her, but it was now over. Beneath the surface of his talk he was deciding how to make his escape. He had no doubt the assassin was waiting in the shadow of a building to get him when he came for his horse.

Nora got him the pistol and he made sure it was loaded. He explained that he did not expect to use it.

"You'll be awf'ly careful, won't you?" she begged.

He tilted her chin and looked down into her worried eyes.

"You can bet a lot on that," he answered, and kissed her lips.

It was meant to be a brotherly kiss, but it did not turn out that way. What had occurred in the past few hours had flung them together and they were no longer strangers. Nora's frozen emotions had come to life and the blood was racing through her veins. Their lips clung fast until she wrenched herself away. She stared at him, breathing deeply.

"I'm a fool," she said bitterly. "You had better go."

"You're alive and not a marble statue," he differed.

Nora turned away, angry at herself and him, disturbed at her excitement. She opened the back door a few inches and looked out. "Maybe he is waiting near your horse," she whispered, fear snatching at her still.

"I'll be using another horse," he explained. "*Adios, muchacha.*"

His eyes searched the darkness before he stepped out. A dog barked in the distance. There was no other sound and no rumor of movement. He lifted a hand to Nora in farewell. As he moved down the alley he asked himself, *Why in thunder did I kiss her?*

At the corner he saw nobody stirring. The sawing of the fiddles and the thumping of feet came faintly to him from the schoolhouse. He made a wide semi-circumference around the square keeping well back from the lights of the saloons. Between buildings he caught sight of his horse still standing patiently at a hitch rack. Beside the courthouse steps he made out a vague dark mass. That would be Duff waiting for him.

Sloan circled the square as far as the back of the Empire saloon. In front of it must be the saddled horses of some of the dancers. He slipped along the wall to the sidewalk.

Bill Cottrell came out of the saloon. They stood facing each other. Bill said coldly, a challenge in his voice. "So you've not gone home yet."

"Not yet," Sloan answered. "Neither has Duff." He took off his hat and pointed to the two holes in the crown.

Cottrell looked at it with startled eyes. "Great guns, you don't mean that Dan——"

"My guess is Duff. Don't blame him for missing. It's a little dark for accurate shooting. He didn't miss the young lady more than six inches. You might take a look at her door. There are two bullet holes in it."

"Is this true? Or are you runnin' a sandy on me?"

"True. Duff is still waiting by the courthouse steps for me to come and get my horse, hoping to be luckier this time. He'll have quite a wait. I'm going to borrow one of these broncs." Sloan nodded toward the row of ponies at the rack.

"Duff is a drunken bullheaded fool," Bill exploded. "We had nothing to do with this."

Sloan agreed ironically. "Not too dependable, is he? Trouble with warriors like Duff is that every once in a while they want to do a killing on their own account. I reckon you have to give them a little leeway. After all he was trying to get the right man."

"I'll beat his head off," young Cottrell threatened.

"Just because his enthusiasm made him a bit premature. You mustn't forget what good work he has done for you in the past." Randolph dismissed the subject airily. "Well, I'll be on my way. Here's where I start being a horse thief." He stepped from the sidewalk to select a mount.

"I'll go get your own horse for you," Bill offered.

Sloan was looking at a sorrel carrying the Circle D brand. He chuckled. "Much obliged, but I won't trouble you. This one will suit me fine. Tell Mr. Duff I say thanks for his kindness in lending me a horse for the ride home. I'll tie the reins to the saddle horn and it will find its way back to the Circle D."

The Bigg's Bend rancher swung to the saddle, turned the cow pony, and passed between the buildings to the alley at a road gait.

Bill listened until he heard the clop-clop of the horse's hoofs die away in the darkness. What had occurred disturbed him greatly. It might mean the breaking out again of the feud. The drunken ruffian had put his family in a bad spot, since it was generally recognized that Duff was a tool of Old Anse. To try to kill Randolph

Sloan without giving him a chance was bad enough, but to run the risk of hitting a woman was an incredible folly that made the shooting far worse. Moreover, Nora Hamilton might still be in danger. In his condition the fellow could start firing at the house.

Cottrell crossed the road to the courthouse and soft-footed around the building to the front. He saw a figure huddled beside the steps.

"If you are waiting there to murder Sloan you are wasting your time," Bill called. "He's left town."

Duff's big body swung toward him. "Come outa there with yore hands up," the man snarled.

"Don't push on the reins. It's Bill Cottrell." The young man moved forward, arms hanging at his sides.

"How d'you know he's gone?" demanded Duff.

"I saw him go — on your sorrel. There's a back door to the Hamilton house."

"On my horse?" Duff broke into a string of savage curses.

Bill waited till he stopped for breath. "You've got yourself in a fine jam. This town is liable to string you up for shooting at a woman."

"I didn't shoot at any woman."

"You didn't miss her a foot. The bullet holes in the door will show that. You'd better fork Sloan's horse and light out sudden."

"Don't tell me what to do." Duff broke out angrily. "Not after pistol-whippin' me the way you did. I've a mind to whale the stuffin' outa you right damn now. I've took enough from yore family. You can tell Anse I'm through doing his dirty work."

"Tell him yourself. You haven't the sense of a half-wit. If you had killed Sloan you would have been rubbed out inside of a week. This country is tired of your bullying ways. A lot of people are afraid of you when you get on your rampages and they would be glad to see you dead and buried. Don't tell me you were a gunman for the Cottrells. You were playing your own hand tonight, and you can't shove the blame off on us. Jump that bronc, get out, and don't come back till folks have time to cool off."

A glimmer of sense penetrated Duff's sodden brain. Men would come and look at the bullet holes in Nora Hamilton's door and their rage would boil up at him. He mumbled explanations and threats but ended by pulling himself into the saddle of Sloan's horse and riding out of town.

From the courthouse yard Bill walked to Miss Hamilton's store. He knocked on the door, upon which was written the proof that Sloan's story was true. Sounds of the young woman moving inside the house came to him, but he had to rap again before her voice answered.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Bill Cottrell. I've come to tell you not to be frightened any longer."

Nora opened the door. "Do you know whether Randolph Sloan got away safely?" she inquired, an urgency in her tone.

"Yes. I saw him go. He told me of the attack. The ruffian who tried to kill him has gone too. He won't be back, but if you are afraid I'll keep guard until morning."

"I'm not afraid. The drunken villain wasn't trying to kill me." Her voice was sharp with anger. "I suppose you would have been pleased if he had shot straighter."

"No. I don't hate Randy Sloan that much. I don't hate him at all. He was dragged into this feud, just as I was. We are not all savages, Miss Hamilton. If I had my way it would be buried forever."

"Then why don't you do something about it? I saw hatred on men's faces tonight when they looked at Mr. Sloan. Someday he will be killed, because if they don't let him alone he will fight back." A heat of resentment was in her words and in her flashing eyes. "And if he does I hope he kills anybody who lifts a hand against him."

She isn't plain and sullen, Bill thought, surprised at the passion breaking through her habitual calm. *She's a flame of beauty when she's roused.* And swiftly, on the heels of that, *I believe she is in love with Randy.*

He said: "The feud is over. My father wants peace. Duff is a drunken savage and will be punished. Don't worry, Miss Hamilton. Sleep well."

His mind was full of her as he walked away. There was in her a fire that might stir men to violence. The stories told of her could be true. Yet he felt that she was neither common nor coarse.

5

WHEN Julia walked into the room her father called his office he was sitting in front of a battered pine table adding with a two-inch stub of pencil his monthly pay roll. For the rest of the house he had bought golden oak furniture and such window draperies as his daughter had insisted upon, but this room was his own and as poorly equipped as that of a penniless nester. No carpet covered the floor, and except for the table it was bare but for two kitchen chairs. On the unpapered walls hung a patent-medicine catalogue and a picture of a Hereford bull torn from a magazine; also a Colt's .45 suspended from a wooden peg and a Winchester rifle resting on the tines of a deer's horns.

The girl said uneasily, "You want to see me." Her smile lacked conviction. She knew he was boiling with anger. That she was his favorite and had been allowed to have her own way usually would not help her now. She had gone too far — unless she could divert his rage to Duff.

He paid no attention to her but went on adding the columns, his lips moving as he murmured the figures. Anse Cottrell was a short barrel-chested man with heavy rounded shoulders and a thick body. Though he had taken on a lot of flesh, there was still a steel band of muscles across his big stomach. He carried his weight badly, letting it settle down so that he looked something like a lumpy shapeless toad. His harsh features were knotted together into a gross powerful face with just a suggestion of slyness. To Round Top it was amazing that this bullnecked strong-jawed atavist could have fathered anyone as dainty and lovely as Julia.

Anse slammed down his note book and wheeled on the girl suddenly. "So you're carrying on with Randolph Sloan," he snarled.

"I danced with him, if you call that carrying on," she answered.

"Why?" He hammered the table with his fist. "Tell me that."

Julia had courage. Her eyes met his steadily. "I don't know, unless it was to find out what a Sloan is like. All my life I've been hearing how bad they are."

"I know how bad they are — stiff-necked fighting fools, overbearing and quarrelsome. I'll learn you to make up to one of them."

"You've described us too, haven't you?" Julia asked. "And I wasn't making up to him. When the dance was stopped I told him out loud before everybody never to speak to me again."

"By God, you're a hell of a daughter. You have to flirt with every man you meet, even if he is my enemy.

I won't stand for it. I've broken this bunch of scalawags. They are all dead or driven out except this fellow. And any kin they have don't do any crowing but walk the straight line I've drawn. Now you've started to stir up trouble — fixin' it so I'll maybe have to rub out this young squirt too."

"I thought the feud was over," Julia ventured mildly.

"Don't pull that on me. It's over only because none of the clan have any fight left in them, but if this upstart gets fresh it could flare up again." His anger exploded. "Haven't you any sense a-tall? They've been our enemies for twenty years. They killed several of yore kin. We got this Randolph's uncle, shot up his father, and sent his brother to jail. He hates our guts. And he's a bad egg. Yet you go crazy and let him dance with you. Girl, I'll cut you down to size."

"I oughtn't to have danced with him," she admitted.

"I've a notion to wear you out with a hickory limb. He's probably going around braggin' about what he did."

Julia thought it time to raise another issue. "He's lucky to be alive. Why do you say I'm making trouble when one of your gun fighters tried to murder him from ambush?"

Anse glared at her. "What you talkin' about?"

"Haven't you heard about Dan Duff coming drunk into the schoolhouse at the dance and trying to get into a fight with this Sloan? Bill and some others broke it up, but later he — or somebody else — shot at Sloan while he and Nora Hamilton were saying good night in front of her store. I've seen the bullet holes in the door. The slugs couldn't have missed Nora more than a few inches. Of course it was Duff. Nobody else would have done it."

The old man rapped out an oath. "Haven't I given orders there is to be no more shooting? I'll rip the hide off Dan for this."

"It won't make a good impression, that we are shooting at women," Julia mentioned with malice.

"He wasn't aimin' at a woman," her father contradicted sharply.

"But he nearly hit one. Of course if we can make it clear that Dan was trying to murder a man it will look better for us."

The girl slanted a quick look at her father to see how he took that thrust.

He flared out, "I tell you we had nothing to do with it."

"Anyhow it is nice for us that folks have a down on Nora and the old cats say she isn't all she should be."

"Keep yore mouth shut. I'll take care of this. I don't pay any mind to how bad she is. We don't fight women. Just the same you had better get another dressmaker."

"Why?" Julia flung back resentfully. "Nora is as nice a woman as I know. I don't believe a word of those rotten whispers."

Cottrell's eyes narrowed in thought. It might be a good idea to follow the lead his daughter was offering. If he was properly indignant at what Duff had done and offered himself as a champion of the Hamilton woman it would scotch any story that he was involved in the shooting.

"We'll call on her together and let her know she has nothing to fear," he said.

"How are you going to treat her — like a leper?" Julia wanted to know. "If that's your idea I won't go with you."

"Don't tell me what you will or won't do. I'll decide that." He added harshly, "You'll keep in line if I have to use a quirt to you."

"The one you use on your horse," she suggested, and quoted scornfully, "'A woman, a dog, and a walnut tree, the more you beat 'em the better they be.' It keeps them in line, as you put it. But maybe Nora is an exception. Maybe she doesn't like to have us righteous people act as if she was dirt under our feet and then make up to her only when it is to our advantage."

"She can't take offense because I am offering to be friendly. It's only right I should warn her not to go with that fellow Sloan, that she will have to choose between him and decent folks."

"Of course she'll drop him at once, since he is the only person here who has been nice to her. You know a lot about women, Father. That's the way to drive her closer to him."

His temper was still burning below the surface, but he realized he must control it if he was to get Julia's help.

"Go get yore bonnet, girl," he told her. "I don't need any advice from you."

Though he would not admit it, she knew he would on account of what she had said be more careful how he handled Nora.

After Julia had introduced him to Nora she kept still and watched with some amusement his blundering attempt to be fatherly and diplomatic. He had wanted, it appeared, to call on Miss Hamilton long ago but he had been so busy he had neglected this duty. He hoped it was not too late now to welcome her to Round Top and wish her success in her business. He had now in his mind of course the shocking and deplorable outrage of last night, and to give her his personal assurance that she would not be molested again and that the drunken fool whoever he was would be punished if caught. The fellow's evident intention had been to frighten Sloan, who was indeed a murderous scoundrel with a very bad record.

Nora said quietly that she had found him very kind and considerate.

Old Anse shook his head sadly. "He has a way with women. They don't at first realize how evil he is."

"He isn't evil at all," Nora answered, looking directly at him.

"My dear, you don't know him. He and the two ruffians he employs as riders held up the Blue Creek stage a year ago and killed the shotgun messenger. It is well known that they are rustlers. Sloan comes of a family of notorious killers. Moreover, he has a bad reputation as a seducer of women. Any girl who trusts him will find in time that she has been deceived." Cottrell added, regret in his voice, "It was wrong of Julia to let the scoundrel dance with her last night. I have given her orders never to speak to him again."

Julia made no comment, but there was a defiant gleam in her eyes.

"I am glad you went to the dance, Miss Hamilton," Anse continued. "Of course you didn't know this fellow's reputation. I hope you will start coming to church. As one of the deacons, I assure you of a warm welcome."

Nora said primly, "Thank you," and nothing more.

If he caught the note of irony in her voice he gave no indication of it. But as he walked down the street with Julia later he said, "I am afraid she is a stubborn wench."

"I am sure she is," Julia answered, covering a chuckle.

"If she is taking up with Sloan I won't have you going to her place." He added virtuously: "She was in an ugly scandal in Nebrasky. Her brother shot another man she was runnin' around with. Better keep away from her."

"She is the only dressmaker in town who knows her business."

"You got dresses enough already. We'll see how she acts with Sloan. I'm not gonna have you getting mixed up in any stink that comes up about them."

Julia had always taken it for granted that the Cottrells had been wholly right in the feud and that all the Sloans were a bad lot. She was beginning to wonder if there was another side to the story.

6

RANDY SLOAN and Tim Jolly, one of his two riders, were branding in the corral the last of half a dozen calves when Morgan Vance rode up and swung from the saddle. He had been riding the line and had stopped on the way home to pick up the mail at the Cross Roads store.

Morg had chased cows for the Sloan family more than twenty years. He was a small man past fifty, bowlegged and slightly lame from a badly healed broken leg caused by a horse rolling over it. His face was wrinkled as a withered pippin and crisscrossed lines scored a diamond-shaped pattern on the leathery back of his tanned neck. In spite of long hard years in the saddle he had a cocky jauntiness of spirit that showed in his tilted hat and chirpy voice.

"Met yore friend Dan Duff at the store and had a little chat with him," he mentioned, his forearms resting on the top rail of the fence.

Sloan took the long hot branding iron from the fire and burned the Box S on the flank of the calf Jolly was holding. An acrid smell of burnt hair and flesh rose into the air along with the blatting of the animal. Jolly released the calf and it ran to join the others huddled at the far end of the corral.

Randy walked to the fence and took his mail — a letter, a newspaper, and an advertising circular. "What did Duff have to say at this pleasant reunion?" he asked casually.

"Plenty. I gather he doesn't like you or me either. He was itchin' to beat me up and said so. Looked like I had my tail in a crack, me not having a gun with me. I dunno why he didn't."

"Orders from Anse Cottrell likely."

"Maybe so, but I had nigger luck. He cussed me out from soda to hock. I thought sure he was going to dust me with his quirt. From now on I tote a hogleg * when I'm away from the ranch."

"But he didn't lay a hand on you."

"Lucky for him he didn't. I'd certainly of killed him next time we met. But he was half a mind to gun me when I hit the saddle. Course I didn't look back and I didn't light out like the heel flies was after me."

Jolly grinned. "I'll bet you didn't move like a snail climbin' a slick log either."

"No, sir, and I didn't wait to roll me a smoke."

Sloan opened the envelope and read the letter. His face lit up. "From Judge Simmons," he said.

Jefferson Simmons, now retired, had been the judge at the trial of Sumner Sloan. It was his opinion that the

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* A hogleg was a six-shooter.

defendant had been convicted on false testimony and he had been bold enough to say so. He had given Summer the lowest possible sentence.

"The judge has been to Phoenix and had a long talk with Governor Brodie, who has written President Roosevelt and asked him to pardon Sumner. It looks like the President may do it, since Brodie was lieutenant colonel in the Rough Riders and whipped the regiment into shape for him."

Morgan Vance tore the hat from his head and flung it into the air. He let out a joyous whoop. "Hi-yi-yippy-yi!"

"Better save your cheering, Morg," Sloan said. "He isn't out yet."

"By jacks, he will be right soon. One thing Teddy does is stick by his rough riders. If Brodie says it's the thing to do Roosevelt will O.K. it." Vance remembered that he had a message to give the boss. "Gauss told me to tell you that he had a pay call yesterday afternoon from Tucson. A man wanted him to get word to you that he will be out to see you either today or tomorrow."

"What man?"

"Name is Bechdolt. He works for the Overland."

"That listens like good news too. He wouldn't bother coming to see me unless the railroad means to hit the Soggy here. Looks like we're on the gravy train, boys."

Urged by Sloan, both of his riders had taken up claims adjoining his. If the Overland should decide to make Bigg's Bend a division point their homesteads would be valuable.

"I reckon I'll run in to Round Top and get roostered my first day off," Jolly said. "I'll sure put on a celebration."

"Not yet," Sloan warned. "Mum is the word for us right now. If the Cottrells hear Sam has a chance for a pardon they will bust a trace to get in their licks against it. Same with the railroad. Anse and his friends would get busy right away. They don't want the station here, let alone the division point, until Anse has taken over my holdings, as he is liable to do unless I can raise some money."

Virgil Bechdolt, the right-of-way representative of the Overland, reached the Box S next day at noon. He was a ruddy-faced little man on the plump side with a ready smile and cordial manner. After eating a dinner cooked by Morgan the ranchman saddled two horses and with his guest rode to the summit of the bluff overlooking the river bend.

The stream lay like a silvery snake below them, its banks flanked here and there by willows and cottonwoods. The adjoining land was a patchwork of green and brown squares, depending on whether it was under cultivation or still in its primal desert condition.

"You have a nice spread," the railroad man said. "It will be worth something if our tracks run through your land."

"It's worth a good deal in any case, but when you have put a station here and put in the improvements for a division its cash value will be more," Sloan amended.

"Aren't you taking a good deal for granted?" Bechdolt asked. "We may decide to run by way of Federal Notch."

"I'm taking it for granted you are realists. Let us put our cards on the table. I have something to sell that you need. It is not a practical proposition to cross the mountains at Federal Notch. The grade is too steep and would require a lot of expensive engineering and the creek on this side of the pass drys up in summer. The Soggy in the only stream this side of Centerville that runs all year."

"We could hit the Soggy at some other point."

"Where? It cuts down from the mountains at the edge of my land, then swings back into a narrow cañon and doesn't see the plain again for thirty miles. You could drive into the hills and hit it higher up but not without building several bridges and adding a dozen miles of rough country to your line."

Bechdolt recognized the force of this argument but did not admit it. "We could run a ditch down from the hills and tank water at tracks fifteen miles from your place."

"So you could. But why, when you can have all you want right at the source? I'm not expecting to hold the company up. You can have for nothing plenty of space for trackage in and out, as well as acreage for a roundhouse and machine shops and a station."

"We might differ as to the amount of land we would need."

"I'll not be niggardly. Within reason you can name your own ticket."

This was better than Bechdolt had expected, but he had come to make the best bargain he could for the railroad. "Since most of your land is valueless without us we would expect one-half the lots in the town site."

"Oh no," Sloan differed. "I have a fine ranch and am doing very well. I wouldn't care to cut it up except to sell town lots."

"Hmp! Young man, we are not building this line for our health. We are doing it to make money. If we open up this country we are entitled to a profit. Our line could cross the desert and miss your place by a dozen miles. For practically nothing we can pick up all the land we want and own the whole shebang."

"You used the right word — the desert. No water supply for your engines or your shops. None for the people in the town. You know as well as I do that without water this whole dry region isn't worth a hoot."

Bechdolt was convinced, but he knew the decision would be made by men sitting in an office in New York poring over engineers' reports and balancing arguments pro and con.

"All I can do is sign a provisional agreement with you, an option giving us what land we need, to be effective only if we decide to take it up. There will be no down payment and no obligation on our part whatever."

"An option usually implies some consideration paid for it," Sloan suggested.

"Not with us. What you get are future possible benefits. I'll be frank. We have already signed options along the Federal Notch route. Strong influences are working to get us to run that way."

Randolph Sloan realized that. The valley back of Federal Notch held some of the best ranches in the territory. From it a spur could be run up Apache Gulch to Chrysolite to tap the mines, or they could let Anse Cottrell's wagons bring the ore down.

"I'm just an errand boy," Bechdolt explained. "The fact that I am getting an option from you means only that the directors want to be sure that if they decide on this route there won't be any right-of-way trouble."

Two days later Randolph signed at Phoenix a paper drawn up by the Overland local representative covering in minute detail the option.

7

THROUGH the office window Anse Cottrell saw his daughter and John Bancroft ride into the yard. He watched the mine superintendent help the girl dismount. They seemed to be in gay good spirits. Bancroft's hands were around her waist and he held her in the air for a moment, her laughing face looking down at his. This pleased Anse. It would suit him very well to have her marry this man. The Easterner was evidently greatly attracted by her. Julia was no fool. She was ambitious and she must know that in getting him she would be making a better match than any other likely to come her way.

Bancroft had come from New York to manage the Sure Fire mine. He was related to Miles Hancock, the controlling influence in the Overland railroad system. Through him Anse kept in close touch with the extension plans of the line.

The old man slumped out to the porch to meet the riders. They made a fine-looking pair, this strong square-jawed man so virile and so dominant and the slim dark-eyed girl so vitally alive. Julia flung up an arm in a gesture of farewell to the mining man and passed into the house. After the ride in the heat of the spring day she was going to take a bath, Anse knew. While she had been away at school in Denver she had acquired the fool habit of bathing practically daily. That was one of several fol-de-rols she had picked up while away.

"Anything new about the Overland?" Cottrell asked.

"A right-of-way man was out here this week and saw Sloan. They signed an agreement."

"Then they've picked the Bigg's Bend route."

"I think not. Uncle Miles isn't missing any bets. He doesn't intend to be held up whichever way he decides. But if I were betting I'd put my money on Bigg's Bend."

Anse was of that opinion himself. Already he had bought from the bank the Sloan mortgages. The land would not be a too bad investment even if the railroad did not come that way. In a cattle country water was the most vital factor and the Soggy never went dry. The Sloan place would round out his ranch holdings nicely. He walked down to the bank and talked with Brad Webber.

"Did you tell Sloan that his note would have to be paid when it falls due?"

"Yes, I did," Webber answered.

"Mistake," growled Cottrell. "I don't see how he can raise the money, but there was no need to warn him."

The banker flushed. He did not want Anse to get annoyed at him, yet he could not let this pass without making it clear he was his own man. "I thought it was the decent thing to do."

"Different here," the older man retorted brutally. "I've found that the only way to treat a Sloan is to stomp on him."

"I understood you want peace," Webber said stiffly.

"So I do. That's why I'll have to bust this bully-puss upstart." The eyes of the man were cold as a wind from an ice-covered lake. He was as ruthless as an old gray wolf.

Webber liked no part of this. He had been a friend of Randolph Sloan, the father of this young fellow, and circumstances had pushed him into a position where he appeared lined up on the other side.

"I don't see that he is bothering you," the banker said.

"You don't have to see it," Cottrell replied, his voice heavily arrogant. "I see it, and I won't stand it."

"Times have changed," Webber said firmly. "You can't any longer tell a man to get off the earth and make it stick."

"I can put him behind bars where he can join his brother."

Webber handed the ranchman a jolt and took a grim pleasure in doing it. "Have you seen Tuesday's *Republican*?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

The banker tossed across the desk the latest copy of the *Arizona Republican* after finding the page and paragraph he wanted.

Cottrell read the indicated story, purple rage flaring into his face. "Jeff Simmons did this — and that no-account Brodie. They got that grandstanding Roosevelt to pardon the killer. I'll show 'em, if it's the last thing I ever do. If Sumner Sloan shows up here he'll walk into his grave."

"That's no way to talk, Anse. Sumner has served five years for killing Joe Tappan and he was convicted on circumstantial evidence."

"Damn it, are you trying to tell me what I can and can't do?" Anse yelped. "Don't forget you're my hired man and I can bust you wide open too." He snatched up his shapeless hat and stormed out of the room.

Webber sat there a long time, his eyes fixed on the ink bottle without seeing it. Anse Cottrell's appetite for power, for trampling down opposition, had become an obsession. He was riding for a fall, but before that day came he could ruin a score of lives. Brad had spent a good many years building up the bank and now had lost control of it to this bullheaded old tyrant. It looked as if he would either have to be a party to the man's appalling malignity or be tossed out.

8

THAT Sumner Sloan had been pardoned filled Anse Cottrell with rage. This was not only a personal insult to him but a threat to his dominance. The Sloans had been down and out. Now they were raising their heads, with the consent if not the backing of powerful friends. There would be war again.

Anse was no reckless bad man. He plotted his campaigns carefully, kept in the background under cover, and instigated others to carry out his plans. When Dan Duff shambled into his office he showed no surprise. One of his agents had dropped a word into the ear of the ranchman that had brought him to town.

Duff glared sourly at the older man. "I'm here," he rasped.

"So I see. You have some business with me?"

"Gus Shonsey told me you wanted to see me."

Anse shook his head. "Gus must have got me wrong, but since you are here sit down."

The big man stayed on his feet. He knew Cottrell had sent Shonsey with a message and was pretending that he had not. The sly old schemer was full of tricks like that.

"I don't get it." Duff growled resentfully. "You gave me hell last time I saw you and told me we were traveling different roads from now on. Then you send for me. What you want? Quit coverin' up and come clean."

"Sit down," Anse snapped. "Seeing you came, I might as well give you a piece of news you won't like. Sumner Sloan is loose again and is probably headed this way."

Duff's mouth tightened. It was several seconds before he spoke. "You mean he's broke outa the pen," he said.

"No. Turned out."

"But he's got five years yet to serve."

"The President pardoned him. It seems Judge Simmons and Brodie got busy."

Duff digested this in silence for a moment. "What you aim to do about it?" he asked.

"Me? Nothing." Cottrell's face showed bland surprise. "It's no skin off my nose. I thought you might be interested."

"Why me more than you?"

"He's of no importance to me, outside of being a nuisance. But you're the one who put him behind bars. Of course maybe he's got religion and forgiven you. The vilest sinner may return, my hymnbook says."

"Is it yore idea that he'll go gunnin' for me?" Duff demanded.

"I wouldn't know. He used to be a rambunctious devil."

"He hates you much as he does me. He knows you were back of the frame-up that sent him to jail."

"Yore memory is a little defective, Dan. I didn't sit in the witness box and perjure myself to convict him the way you did."

"Blast it, you engineered the whole thing. Now you want to shove it off on me. I won't stand for it."

"Better explain that to him when you meet. Maybe you two will get to sleepin' under the same tarp." Cottrell tee-heed at the thought.

Duff was irritated as well as worried. Sumner Sloan would never rest until he had evened the score. He guessed that Anse meant to use him as a cat's-paw and that he would probably be driven to accepting the rôle. He had to get the jump on the returned convict.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked doggedly.

"Far as I'm concerned nothing. But you're in a spot, Dan. No use foolin' yourself into thinkin' you're not. Better talk it over with Gus Shonsey and Clint LePage. They were witnesses too and won't be feelin' too easy now Sumner is around again. But don't go off half-cocked and do anything foolish. Play it safe whatever you do."

Duff looked down at the slumped figure of Cottrell who was so smugly passing the problem over to him. A devil of hatred looked out of the big man's eyes. He had always griped at being the man's tool. Cottrell had used him almost contemptuously, as if he were no more than a two-spot in the old man's game. Someday his rage would boil over, though as yet he had kept it within bounds. Anse knew too much of his activities outside the law.

"Like you do," he sneered. "What you mean is play it safe for you, so afterward you can shake yore head like the pious old hypocrite you are and throw me down."

"Hard names break no bones, Dan."

"I know what you want, but you won't come out and say it. Last week you cussed me out for taking a crack at one brother; now you want me to bump off the other. A killing is fine when you want it, but if one of us cuts loose on his own there's hell to pay. We got to wait till you order it."

Cottrell's beady eyes were hard and cold. "I'm giving you no orders of any kind. Don't put words in my mouth. You're a free agent. All I have done is warn you that Sumner Sloan is on the loose again. If you want to sit around and have him cut you down it's nothing to me."

"Do you know when he's gonna get here?"

"No. Maybe he won't show up at all. But my hunch is he'll be on the stage tomorrow and make straight for their ranch."

"Unless a welcoming committee stops his clock."

"If it was any of my business I would say that was a plumb-fool idea. If you mean to protect yourself don't do it here in town. He'll probaby make a break and you can take measures then."

"Providing I'm still alive. I get yore point, Anse." Duff's lip curled in a sneer. "Better dry-gulch him somewhere out in the chaparral where nobody will think you responsible."

"Now you're doing my thinking for me. All I've said is that this fellow is a wild and reckless hellion and for you to be careful."

"Yeah, I heard you," Duff jeered.

He turned and swaggered out of the house. The thought was in his mind that he would be a fool to sit around and wait just because it suited Anse.

9

NORA had told Randolph Sloan not to come back but she felt sure he would. If he needed any excuse the return of the pistol could serve as one. As the days passed and she saw nothing of him she was aware of disappointment. There had been an hour when danger had flung them close and the memory of it still tingled in her veins. She told herself she was foolish. To a man like Sloan a kiss meant nothing. Save that she was hungry for affection it would not have been important to her. If what Anse Cottrell said of him was true, that he was a rustler and an outlaw, he had gone too far for any decent woman to give him friendship. In spite of his sardonic appraisal of himself she could not believe that he had shot down an innocent man while robbing a stage. Wild and reckless though he was, it did not seem in character. What drew her to him was the picture in her mind of a man debonair and fearless facing great peril with his head up. But she had to know that he was not a callous killer.

She met Matt Chunn in front of her store one morning and he took advantage of his age to fling audaciously at her a bit of news. “That ding-busted hell-a-miler of yores is back in town today.”

“Meaning Mr. Sloan?” she inquired.

“Y’betcha.”

She might have snubbed him if she had not felt that the old fellow liked her and admired Randolph. “He’s not mine,” she said. “I haven’t seen him since the night of the dance.”

“Hmp! For pure unadulterated gall that boy has got the world whipped. I hear he up and danced with Miss Julie that night.”

“Yes.” There was a smile in her eyes. “He seems to go after what he wants.”

“He’s foolin’ with fire. He’ll get his come-uppins if he don’t look out. Yes, ma’am, a sure enough sassy young devil. Minds me of when I was a twenty-dollar-a-month cowpoke and all I wanted was a saddle, a quirt, a bronc, and onct in a spell God send Sunday so I could go gallin’.”

“Did *you* rob stages too, Mr. Chunn?”

“Hmp! Someone has been spillin’ the dirt to you. All I got to say is it ain’t been proved he did it and won’t be. Randy has got enemies.”

The old man’s quick resentment warmed her. “I’m glad you think so,” she told him. “You’re a fraud, sir. You like Randolph Sloan.”

“I don’t no such a thing,” he sputtered indignantly as he left.

While Nora dusted the counters she was not very happy. Sloan was in town and he had not come to see her. While the thought was still in her mind he stood in the doorway smiling at her.

He handed her the little pistol she had lent him. "It was a moral support even if I didn't have to use it," he told her. "Thank you kindly."

Because she did not want him to know how glad she was to see him her manner was stiff. "It was fortunate that you did not need it, Mr. Sloan," she said.

"The name is Randy," he corrected. "It's a big day for me. My brother is getting in on the stage."

"Your brother Sumner?"

"My only brother. President Roosevelt has given Sumner a pardon."

Nora said, her eyes lighting, "I'm so pleased."

"I want you to meet him. Maybe not today, but soon. We'll probably go right out to the ranch. . . . I see Duff's calling cards are still on the door. You haven't had any trouble since?"

"No. People have been friendlier." She smiled, ironically. "Mr. Anson Cottrell called on me and put me under his protection."

"How good of him."

"With one stipulation. I am to have nothing to do with an evil young man who held up a stage and murdered the guard." Nora's voice was light and easy. It was not possible for her to see Randolph and believe in his guilt.

"Anse has had experience in framing Sloans. He would have liked to send me down to the penitentiary too, but he didn't quite dare try it on account of public opinion."

"He would have had to show evidence, wouldn't he?"

"The three bandits rode horses carrying the Box S brand. They had picked their mounts up on the range. One of the fellows called the leader Randy. Another of them limped like one of my riders Morg Vance does. It was a put-up job to throw it on us. But Anse didn't have the nerve to go through with it. He wasn't sure we didn't have sound alibis."

"Did you?"

"No. Only each other." He glanced at his watch. "Nearly stage time. I've got to mosey along."

"I'm awf'ly glad about your brother," she repeated.

"Your new guardian Anse Cottrell won't be," he commented dryly. "By the way, are you dropping that no-account scalawag he warned you against?"

"Can't afford to, since I'm tarred with a similar brush myself," she answered. "Run along and meet your brother. You mustn't be late."

His eyes danced. "Lady, I'm going to like you certain."

He carried with him the picture of the swift answering smile that lit her face and made it beautiful. It pleased him that he could dispel, momentarily at least, the unhappiness that had become a settled weight upon her.

The young woman watched him go, noting the crisp confident step that carried his weight lightly as a schoolgirl does hers. That stride was as much a part of him as the chuckling amusement which had just been crinkling his face.

A light breeze from the mountains swept down the street and lifted into the air a small dust devil that danced ahead of Randolph an inverted cone. He heard the high joyous note of a meadowlark. As he passed Gwinn's hardware store he met Julia Cottrell and John Bancroft. The man wore well-cut riding breeches and a tweed coat, the girl a sprigged muslin with a blue sash around her waist and a jaunty little hat on her head. She responded to Sloan's "Good morning, Miss Cottrell" with a cut direct. By way of the open corridor of the courthouse Randolph reached the other side of the square. He glanced at two saddled horses dozing at the rack in front of the Empire saloon. Siding his brother, he expected to ride home on one of them.

Against the adobe wall of Jim Wong's restaurant a small man was leaning, his slender body motionless as a statue. Sloan became aware that the wary half-shuttered eyes of this still deadly lounger were resting on him steadily. A cold wind blew through the Bigg's Bend rancher. Was Cully Ducret watching him because he knew or guessed that Sumner was coming in on the stage today?

The report had come up from Texas that Ducret had snuffed out several lives before leaving there. During the feud he had been the personal guard of Anse Cottrell. Six years ago he and Sumner had met on the square and when the guns had stopped roaring Ducret lay wounded on the street. Since there was a strain of Indian blood in him he was not likely to have forgotten that he had lost face on that occasion.

Already descending the courthouse steps, Randolph held an even stride across the lawn and road. He said, "A fine day, Mr. Ducret."

The frozen gaze of the cat-eyed man held fast to those of Sloan a long moment before he turned and walked away without answering. The Texan moved with smooth rhythm, almost noiselessly. Though a notorious leather-slapper, quick on the trigger, he was a rare type of bad man. Liquor he never touched. Except casually he knew no women. No emotional handicaps interfered with his efficiency behind a six-shooter. A lone wolf, he went his way neither boasting nor swaggering. When he addressed others, his voice was always low and courteous.

Heading down Jeff Davis Street, Randolph observed three men push through the swing doors of Mike Maroney's saloon. The first was Dan Duff, the others Gus Shonsey and Clint LePage. *A gather of our enemies,* he thought, and instantly tied their presence to the arrival of his brother. He felt again that curious sixth sense of danger, a tensity in the atmosphere crowding on him.

Already he could see the stage topping the hill at the end of the street. As always, Hank Main, the driver, brought the Concord down the home stretch fast. That last three-hundred-yard gallop was for him the high moment of the day. His foot jammed the brake down and he dragged the sweat-stained horses to a halt.

"Yippy yi!" he yelped. "All out."

A drummer stepped to the platform first and after him a bulging blonde already fencing with the encroaching years. Sumner Sloan followed. He was a tall gaunt man, strongly built. Fierce hungry eyes looked out defiantly from a thin face that still held the prison pallor. From those on the platform they picked out his brother. He said, flat-voiced, "'Lo, Randy." The younger man nodded a careless greeting. No observer could have guessed what a tide of feeling churned in them.

Old Matt Chunn shuffled forward. "Sure pleased to see you, boy. Seems like old times again." As he shook hands with Sumner his high falsetto voice dropped almost to a whisper. "Bunch of wolves hangin' around Maroney's place."

Randolph nodded. "Much obliged, Matt. Saw 'em on the way down." He turned to his brother, his words a murmur. "You heeled, Sum?"

"Bought me a gun at Tucson. You lookin' for trouble?"

"Afraid it's lookin' for us. Duff and Shonsey and LePage are in town. They have been drinking. May not mean a thing, but I reckon we'd better take the alley till we reach the square where our mounts are tied."

To see them one could easily have guessed that they were kin. They had the same reaching stride and the bone conformation of their faces was alike.

As they moved up the alley their eyes searched the top of the adobe corral fence on one side of the lane and the rear of the buildings on the other. The price of life for them during the next few minutes might be vigilance.

A man crossed the alley in front of them, glanced their way, and vanished between two buildings. They could hear the slap of his running feet.

"In a hurry," Sumner said dryly.

"Yes. Hod Crane. Rides for Anse Cottrell. On the jump to report."

The Sloans came out of the alley to the courthouse square. Duff and his two companions had arrived before them. They were grouped on the other side of the plaza. At sight of the brothers they separated. Duff stayed in the alcove of Frenchy's poolroom. Shonsey, a heavy short man in his forties, cut down at a right angle toward the Sloans. LePage crossed the lawn and disappeared behind the courthouse.

Sumner tilted his head toward a man sitting on the rear steps of the courthouse. "Ducret too," he said grimly. "They don't aim to have us leave town, not ever."

The Texan was smoking a cigar, lounging negligently with a forearm resting on the step back of him. He was the picture of a man at ease taking a siesta in the sun.

Randolph had the odd feeling of having gone through all this before, though the pattern was different from other battles in which he had been engaged. Etched in his memory, former moments came to life when men like pieces on a chessboard were shifted to their positions to gain an advantage. He brushed this aside and concentrated wholly on the present.

A six-mule ore outfit driven by a jerk line stood in the road close to the Sloans. They took a position back of the wagon. The driver came out of a harness shop and started to free from a hitching post the near front leader.

Randolph said, "Not just now, mister."

The mule skinner wheeled in sharp surprise. "What's that?"

"Leave that wagon where it's at."

"Why?"

"Friend, you had better *vamos*. Hell is going to pop."

The driver's startled gaze swept the plaza. He was an old-timer and this scene carried back to others when the feud had been active. Without another word he bolted back into the store from which he had come.

Two more men appeared, emerging from Jeff Davis Street. One of them was Hod Crane.

"Stay put," Shonsey shouted to them.

In the long dragging silence before the guns began to sound a meadowlark again lifted its full-throated song.

"Come out and take yore medicine, you damned wolves," Duff cried. "Yore string has done run out."

"Suits us here," Sumner called back harshly. "If you want us come and get us."

LePage and Shonsey were edging closer.

"Don't crowd us," Randolph warned.

A bullet whipped across the plaza and struck the tire of a wheel. Duff gave a triumphant yell. "Go get 'em, boys."

Sumner's gun smoked an answer. Half a dozen shots followed, so close together that the sound of them almost merged. At the roar of Duff's first shot Shonsey had disappeared into the store behind him and run around the alley. Now he came loping through the harness shop from the rear.

"Look out," Sumner warned.

Randolph wheeled, to see Shonsey firing from the store window back of them. His .45 boomed a fraction of a second before that of young Sloan. Randolph felt something slap his shoulder. He saw Shonsey teetering in the window, trying to balance himself on feet spread wide apart. The man's knees sagged and his body plunged forward, crashing through the glass to the sidewalk outside. He lay on his face, a man already dead. Randolph was never more surprised in his life.

"Crowd 'em! Crowd 'em!" Duff screamed.

The sight of Shonsey's body hurtling through the window was a jolt to the attackers. They had looked for an easy kill, but they knew now that it would not be that way. The Sloans had the cover of the ore wagon and they could not be driven from it. To close in on them would probably cost more lives.

A shot from Sumner's revolver racketed across the square. Hod Crane ripped out an oath. "Damn it, I'm hit," he cried.

The Texan still sat on the courthouse steps. He had taken no part in the shooting. A spiral of smoke rose from his cigar.

"What's eatin' you, Ducret?" shouted Duff. "Get into this and drill 'em."

Ducret rose to his feet. "Kill yore own snakes, Duff," he answered. "I'm not in this." He turned and disappeared in the corridor of the building.

The slug in Crane's arm annoyed him. He flung an angry jeer at Duff. "Quit hangin' back there under cover and rush 'em yore own self."

Duff moved out of the entry. "All right. Close in, boys. We'll stop their clocks right damn now."

Randolph did not raise his voice, but there was a bite to it that carried. "Not before two-three of you have gone to hell on a shutter," he flung back.

10

JULIA and John Bancroft returned to Gwinn's hardware store fifteen minutes after meeting Randolph Sloan to settle a bet as to the girl's weight. They stood near the back of the room beside the scales to fix the terms of the bet, speaking in low tones that would not reach the owner of the place.

"What are we going to bet?" Julia asked.

"A kiss against a pair of those long gloves you want," he suggested.

Into her cheeks flared a touch of added color and into her eyes dancing sparks of light. "You are not going to win, you know," she warned him.

He too was pleasantly excited. If he won it would be the first time he had kissed her. "You won't renege?" he insisted. "You'll pay if you lose."

"I'd pay," she promised. "But I'm not going to lose. I've been dying for those gloves. You can get them at Nora Hamilton's."

"Can I come and collect tonight?" he retorted smilingly.

"You may come and see me try on my new gloves."

"One hundred and seventeen pounds. If you are an ounce above that on these scales you lose."

"Yes, but I'll do the weighing, sir."

"With me watching you to see you don't fudge," he added.

She lifted from the bar the leaden weight marked one hundred pounds, and as she did so the roar of a gun sounded from the sidewalk outside. Julia stood, startled, the weight in her hand. Almost before the echo had died there came the crash of other weapons.

"Who is it?" she asked, disturbed in mind. Already the girl feared Sloan was involved in trouble.

Bancroft hurried to the door. Gwinn was at the window.

"Duff for one," the storekeeper said. "And LePage. Others too. I can't make out who they are firing at."

"Some fellows standing behind an ore wagon," Bancroft reported. "Can't see who they are."

Two more shots rang out. The men in the store saw Shonsey's body lunge through the window of the harness shop.

"Holy Moses, they've got Shonsey," Gwinn cried. "Two of them there, looks like."

A head rose behind the wagon to sight a shot.

"It's that Sloan," Bancroft said.

"With his brother siding him. I'll bet Duff started this."

Julia ran to the front of the store. "We've got to stop this now — at once," she urged.

Bancroft shook his head. "Nothing we can do. I'm not armed."

She whirled on Gwinn. "You have guns in the store — lots of them."

"I don't reckon we had better mix up in this," the storekeeper answered. "They're a tough lot — all of them."

"If you won't, I will." Julia started for the door.

Bancroft caught at her arm. "Don't be crazy. You might get shot."

She tore free of him and ran out to the sidewalk. Duff was standing in front of Frenchy's poolroom not four yards from her, a .45 in his hand raised to fire. Julia swung her arm. The heavy iron weight struck Duff on the temple. He went down like an ox at a slaughterhouse. His finger twitched automatically and a bullet tore through the sidewalk into the road flinging up a spurt of dirt.

A voice from a second-story window of the bank building rang a loud warning across the plaza. "I'll cut down the next man that fires." Bill Cottrell was sitting on the sill, a rifle in his hands.

The attackers were ready to quit. They had enough, with two men down and a third wounded. But LePage growled a protest to save face.

"You in this, bub?" he snarled.

"I'm declaring myself in," Bill flung back. "Make a move, Clint, and you're a gone goose."

LePage was a long lean man with small eyes set too closely in a sour ugly face. From where he stood he could see Shonsey lying on his face with arms outflung and Duff prone on the walk head and shoulders drooping over the edge to the dusty road. He was glad to withdraw from a battle that had turned against them.

"So it's a double cross," he growled. "Fine. I'll remember that."

He turned and straddled into the store behind him. With the exception of Duff the other attackers had already gone to cover.

Julia stepped back into the hardware store. She was white to the lips and trembling.

"That'll be all for today," Gwinn said. "Looks like a passel of boys went to mill." He spoke severely to the girl. "It turned out all right this time, but don't you ever do anything so crazy again, Miss Julie."

"No," she said, her voice flat and lifeless. "I don't know why I did it."

Bancroft came into the store carrying Duff's revolver. "The fellow is coming to," he said, and looked at Julia. "Girl — girl, for God's sake!"

"I know, John," she interrupted. "You don't need to tell me. I'm a fool and haven't any sense."

He agreed with her about that, but it was in his mind that she was gallant in her folly. He could not refuse her admiration, yet blended with it was a sharp irritation. A young lady had no business involving herself in a gun fight between ruffians. It was not the proper conduct for her. Moreover, it implied criticism of him because he had taken no action. What rankled deepest was the suspicion that she had been motivated entirely by her interest in that young scamp Randolph Sloan. It was absurd of course. An out-at-elbows nobody could not possibly be his rival. None the less the fellow was beginning to annoy him.

11

A MINUTE before, the plaza's quiet had been shattered by the noise of battle. Now there were no enemies in sight but the dead man lying close to Sumner's foot and the sprawling figure of Duff in front of Frenchy's place. Except for the gunmen the square had been deserted, yet already the sidewalks were alive with men and boys who had poured out from stores and saloons.

Sumner said, "This is a hell of a welcome home. Thought you told me the feud was over."

Randolph frowned. "Something queer about this. I don't get it. Ducret was in a better position to get us than any of the others and he didn't fire a shot. And Bill Cottrell sided with us. Why? Looks like Duff wasn't playing Old Anse's hand but his own."

"You can't ever tell about that sly old devil Anse. Bill might have been set where he was to make the thing look good for his father."

"I don't think so. Bill is fed up with the feud."

"It's the girl that gets me. Who is she? Why did she butt in?"

Randolph told him about Julia, a girl torn between her hatred of the Sloans and the violence of the Cottrell faction.

Matt Chunn hobbled along the sidewalk and hailed the brothers joyously. "By gorry, you showed 'em. That bunch of wolves will think twice before they get on the prod again."

"We had luck," Randolph said.

"Damn it, you pumped out yore own luck," the old-timer squeaked in his high falsetto.

Sumner made a discovery. "You've been hit, Randy."

"In the shoulder. We'd better drop in and see Doc Jones. I reckon nobody will trouble us now."

Still carrying the rifle, Bill Cottrell met them. He explained that this was none of his father's doing, that Duff and his wild bunch had attacked on their own.

Hard-eyed and bitter, Sumner glared at him. "Just like a Cottrell, trying to pass the buck to the gun fighters you hire."

Bill flushed angrily but said nothing. Randolph spoke in his defense.

"He had nothing to do with this, Sumner."

"Maybe not," the older brother answered. "Maybe Old Anse was not in it either. His way would be to get us in the back from ambush."

Young Cottrell remained silent. If the rumors that had come to him were true Sumner had a legitimate reason for hating Anse and this attempt to kill him would not modify his resentment. He walked beside the Sloans as far as the doctor's office to protect them against a possible shot.

Doctor Jones was dressing the wound of another patient. At sight of the Sloans Hod Crane jumped from the table on which he was lying, a quick alarm in his eyes, and reached for his revolver.

"Hold it!" Randoph warned. "Or we'll drill you certain."

"Too bad I didn't shoot straighter," Sumner said angrily. "If you feel lucky, Hod, pull that gun and have another try."

"No — no!" the doctor cried. "Not in my office."

"Don't push on the reins, Hod," Randolph ordered. "We're through for today unless you're asking for more."

Crane's hand slid away from the butt of his weapon. "I ain't lookin' for trouble," he growled.

"Get along with that job, Doc," Sumner told Jones. "You've got another patient here."

The wounds of both men were comparatively slight. After the doctor had treated and dressed Randolph's shoulder the Sloans found Bill Cottrell waiting outside. Sumner told him harshly that they did not want his protection. Bill answered that he did not care how they felt about it, he was going to see them safely out of town.

He walked with them to their horses and watched them ride out of the plaza.

From the window of Nora Hamilton's shop two women also saw them ride away, lean, flat-backed, hard-muscled men born to the saddle and the desert sun. One was wounded and had his arm in a sling, the one with whom the minds of both the observers were concerned. In

Julia Cottrell's eyes was a flare of puzzled anger. She could not understand herself. Why was she letting this wild devil-may-care scamp disturb her life? Until recently he had been only one of a bunch of lean long-bodied men who rode in groups when they came to town and were murderous enemies of her family. She had not thought of them as individuals, with good and bad qualities like other people, but impersonally as outlaws and killers. Now he stirred every time she saw him a hot resentment in her heart. His cool impudence was an affront. Yet when she gave her thoughts wing they flew to him. That he had become not only an individual but one who made so great an impact on her emotions was both annoying and absurd. She had planned her future, to marry John Bancroft and escape from this small backwash of hate to a larger scene, to share the success that would surely be his. But the moment she had heard Randolph was in danger she had flung away her dignity and pride to rush out like a shrew and defend him.

"I hate that man," she cried furiously.

"Is that why you interfered to save his life?" Nora asked.

"I'll never hear the end of that," Julia replied bitterly. "Father ought to whip me for the spoiled brat I am."

"I wish I had done what you did," Nora differed. "But if I had been there I would not have had the courage."

"You interfered once yourself." Julia's eyes rested on the other woman. "Are you in love with him?"

Nora stiffened and flung back the same question. "Are you?"

"I don't know any man I detest more." Julia clenched her fists tightly, then opened her fingers with a rueful laugh. "But there's no need for me to get excited about it."

After Julia had gone Nora started to work on an antimacassar she was making, but presently her fingers dropped into her lap. Her thoughts were busy with the question Julia had asked. Was she in love with Randolph Sloan? If so she was being very foolish. He was not the kind of man to be interested in a woman beyond a certain point, and even if he were she could not marry him. Like a prisoner with a ball and chain, she was tied to her past.

The Sloans rode through the shabby suburbs of the town into the clean blossoming desert. For a mile or more Nester Creek ran parallel to the road, a stream that in the summer diminished from a trickle of water to none, and here fences were to be seen with poor discouraged clusters of buildings in the distance, but as they drew into more open country only a lone windmill flashing sun signals from its whirling blades suggested human habitation.

This was familiar terrain to Sumner. He was coming back to the life he had loved as a boy. The years had taken toll of his cheerful youth and left him an embittered man. It had been Randolph's hope that the sun and the wind and the wide spaces might prove in time a great healer. But as he looked at his tight-lipped brother now, his face harsh and frozen, the fear grew in him that it was too late. Today had set a pattern for the future.

There could be no peace now. Even if Anse Cottrell had not incited the attack he would have to stand back of his men. Already the old fox must be busy building a story that put the blame on the Sloans. Jim Barkley of the *News* was a henchman of Anse and would support in the paper an interpretation adverse to the Bigg's Bend ranchmen. Since Sumner was a convicted killer just released from prison he already had two strikes called on him. To those on the outside it would be hard to explain why within three days of his pardon he was in another gun fight in which one of his enemies was killed. Randolph was in trouble as deep as his brother this time. It had been a slug from his gun that had killed Shonsey.

Several witnesses had seen the start of the battle, but old Cottrell had a way of undermining evidence by twisting or scotching it until the truth became obscured. After putting Sumner behind bars he had underestimated the danger of Randolph and let him live, but he would not make that mistake again. A shrewd old scoundrel, he recognized that the days when he could order his gunmen to slam bullets openly into enemies had passed. He would prefer to achieve his end by legal chicanery, but if that failed a shot from the chaparral would serve his purpose. There would be an open season on the Sloans, and the silent hills would tell no stories.

12

IN A thinly settled country of wide open spaces news spreads fast as a prairie fire. Within a few hours the story of the fight on the courthouse square had run up the gulches and across the hills to every isolated settler. Even without it the word that Sumner was back would have brought all the Sloan kin and adherents to the Box S to welcome him home, but the dramatic manner of his return quickened the gather. The upshot of the battle was a shot in the arm to the whole faction. They had been leading defeatist lives under the shadow of Anse Cottrell's brutal dominance and the rout of half a dozen of his bullies by the two brothers filled the younger males with exultant triumph. The gratification of the women and the older men was tempered by the fear that this meant the start again of night riding and shootings from ambush.

Randolph shared their anxiety. He was delighted by the warmth of their pleasure at seeing Sumner but he minimized the victory on the plaza and made it plain he did not intend to go on the warpath.

"We had luck," he explained. "And in spite of that they might have rubbed us out if the two young Cottrells hadn't sided us. We don't know what Old Anse will do now. It's his move. He is doing a lot of business with the Chrysolite mines and is making big money. There never was a greedier man. The crowd he is with now doesn't believe in gun fighting. They get what they want through the law. Anse claims he is all for peace. Maybe he is. If so, he won't back Dan Duff's crazy play."

A short thickset man with cold protruding eyes and mouth a narrow slit tightly closed except when he opened it to talk scoffed at the younger Sloan's guess as to what Anse would do.

"He's an old gray wolf and he ain't changed a bit. You were just a kid when the feud was going strong. Maybe you think he's changed. Different here. He's still a damned old sidewinder. The brake has done bust and he is off again."

Andy Putnam, a small man with a face dry as a withered apple from which quick beady eyes gleamed, nodded approval. "Tubbs is right. Anse will be the same till he kicks off and goes to hell. You young fellows don't know him like we do."

A slim hard youth not more than nineteen clapped his hands in support of Tubbs and Putnam. "By jinks, that's the way to talk. Randy and Sum are a hell-poppin' team. They made a bunch of Anse's scalawags look like plugged nickels. When we get going these hired warriors will light out like scared rabbits."

Hugh Pressman was a cousin of the Sloans. He had been too young to take any part in the feud fighting and was eager to show his mettle.

To Randolph's surprise Sumner stood for peace. "That kind of talk doesn't buy us a thing, Hugh," he told the youngster. "When I wasn't much older than you I was put behind bars and stayed there what seemed a lifetime because Anse Cottrell was slick enough to frame me. Randy and I may be in a jam already from killing Shonsey in the rookus this morning. It won't help us any if we go hog wild now. The thing to do is play it close to our bellies and not make the mistake of giving that old devil a chance to hand you the same kind of a deal he did me."

Crawford Sloan, an uncle of Randolph, took a corncob pipe from his mouth and offered an opinion. He was a big man, heavy-shouldered, running to middle-aged flesh, but with the sap of life still strong in him. "I don't think Anse can put anything over on you boys for what happened this morning. Too many people saw Duff's bunch crowd you. Just the same you are right about us going slow. It may be like Randy says. If Anse was back of Duff why didn't Ducret take a hand in it?"

A gaunt man, his face lined and eyes bitter, stopped chewing tobacco to have his say. He was the husband of Mary Sloan, a sister of Sumner and Randolph. His gaze challenged Tubbs and Putnam. "Easy to start a war, but a hell of a job to end one," he said. "I got a wife and three children, and I don't aim to jump into trouble if I can duck it. Not one of you hates Anse more than I do. His gun slingers killed my brother and burned down my house. He has rawhided me plenty, like he has you-all. But I'm no jugheaded fool. If he's ready to call quits I'm sure willing. I don't have to stop hating him. Personally I don't think the cussed old toad will take the jolt he got today without hitting back. That's up to him. Wait and see, I say."

"Larson is right," Crawford agreed. "If we are smart we'll play a waiting game. Duff and his crowd jumped the gun because they figured they had better rub out Sumner before he went after them. At least that's how I figure it. That sly old fox Anse is smart. He knows a hundred men who weren't in the feud at all are sore because of what his killers tried to do today. He's ridin' with the money group now and he knows he can't pull off the rough stuff he got away with once. Times have changed, and bull-necked though he is the old scoundrel must see it."

"It's time we women had a say in this," Mary Larson said sharply. "I lost a father, a brother, and an uncle in this feud. That's enough. I don't want to see my sons slaughtered too. We are not savages. Let's try and live in peace."

There were four other women present. All of them had known long days and nights of fear, and all of them joined in Mary's plea. Their husbands had known how deeply their wives had felt but this was the first time they had come out publicly in unanimous protest.

Tubbs lifted his upper lip in a sneer. "We'll sure do fine if we let our women run us," he flung out in disgust.

Mary was still a pretty woman. Anger sparked in her dark eyes. "Maybe it's time you did, Joe Tubbs. We couldn't do worse than you've done. There must be some way to prevent any more of the dreadful unhappiness we've been through."

"Sure," he answered harshly. "Bump off Anse and a passel of his riffraff."

"We tried that way once, Joe," Randolph mentioned. "For several years. Seven of us died — and he is still alive."

"He wouldn't have been if I'd had my way," Tubbs retorted, color deepening in his full-blooded face. "You Sloans are so damned noble. A guy don't give rattlers a chance to bite him first, not if he's got a lick of sense. But you never learn. Thing to do is stomp 'em out. Trap 'em. Dry-gulch 'em, like they did us."

Randolph was standing beside the fireplace, his mind weighing the currents of opinion that swept to and fro. Though he was among the youngest of the group, a strange thing had taken place. He had become the leader of his faction. It was his job to guide these kinfolks and neighbors safely through the troublous days ahead. He brought his fist slowly and gently down on the mantel.

"No, Joe. We're not murderers. Even if we tried your way we couldn't beat Anse at it — not with that bunch of killers back of him. We'll ride this situation for a while and watch it. Right now we have the public with us. We don't want to throw away that advantage."

"What the hell will the public do for us when Anse starts his sniping from the brush?" demanded Tubbs.

"The point is that he has not started yet," Randolph replied patiently. “He'll figure what pays him best. Maybe he'll fling Duff and his friends overboard.”

“So we sit on our hands waiting till he bumps off two-three of us,” Tubbs barked.

“If you want to put it that way,” Randolph said, his voice quiet and unruffled. “The one thing we must not do is stir this feud up again. Let it die if it will.”

Andy Putnam's brittle laughter cackled out. “Job didn't have a thing on you, Randy. You sure can take plenty. When that bunch of warriors were flinging lead at you today were they lettin' the feud die. Goddlemighty! Right now you're carrying in yore shoulder a peace message from them.”

“It's Randy's shoulder,” Morgan Vance reminded Putnam. “If he is willing to forget it so as to help bring peace to this country we oughtn't to ride him for it.”

The wounded man smiled. “I'll not worry about this scratch if Anse Cottrell doesn't about Shonsey's death.”

“Let Randy handle this his way,” his sister Mary broke out impatiently. “Maybe he is right about Old Anse.”

The talk ran on, but the hotheads were outnumbered and at last gave way reluctantly.

Crawford and his wife stayed a few minutes after the other visitors had left.

“I wish I felt more sure about Tubbs,” Crawford said, his forehead knitted in a frown. “Putnam would be all right if it weren't for Joe who leads him around by the nose. But Joe is a troublemaker. You can't depend on him.”

“I wish he were not one of us.” Randolph glanced at his brother. “It has always been my opinion that he killed Joe Tappan.”

“I think so,” Sumner agreed. “And I did six years for it.”

“We’d better serve notice on him not to start anything,” Crawford said. “I’ll see him tomorrow and put it plain to him that we’ll turn him over to the Cottrells if he makes a crazy play.”

“Time we’re on the way home, Craw,” his wife reminded him.

The brothers smoked a pipe before they went to bed.

Randolph said, “I’m glad you backed me tonight, Sum. I wasn’t sure you would.”

The older brother rose and knocked the dottle from his pipe into the fireplace. When he turned his face was bleak.

“It’s a thin chance, but I don’t see any other.” The eyes that looked at Randolph were hard as marbles. “Before I left the pen I made up my mind to one thing. I’ll never go back there again. Rather than that I’ll pass out in smoke. It’s up to Old Anse.”

13

RANDOLPH was at a loss how to express his deep gratitude to Julia Cottrell for her unexpected help in the battle on the square. If he tried to see her he felt sure she would repulse him sharply. But he could not let the matter drop without a word of appreciation.

He decided to send a note and wasted a dozen sheets of paper in the attempt to say what was in his mind. Even to get it started was a hard nut to crack. He could not call this impulsive enemy who had befriended him his dear Miss Cottrell, but to leave the adjective out set a stiff harsh pattern. Finally he did not use either her name or his own. He wrote on the paper nothing but a quotation from Shakespeare he had seen somewhere. It was, he thought, from one of the plays, he did not know which.

I can no other answer make but thanks
And thanks — and ever thanks.

This was impersonal, yet she could read into it as much warmth as she pleased. Next day he mailed it at the Cross Roads post office.

While there he picked up a letter from Brad Webber. The banker said he wanted to talk with him secretly. He would ride out to the ranch if he were not just now having trouble with his rheumatism. His suggestion was that Randolph slip into town after dark and meet him at his house.

Sloan knew this was no trap. He recognized the handwriting. Webber had been a friend of his father and was a man of integrity. Sumner was not so sure. Brad was all right, but somebody else might have found out about the meeting. Or Randolph might by chance run into some of their enemies.

"I'll side you, boy," he said.

Randolph flatly rejected this offer. One man could get in and out of town without attracting attention, but it would be difficult for two. Reluctantly Sumner gave way. When the younger brother swung into the saddle he was still full of misgiving.

Tim Jolly, back from Round Top with a wagonload of supplies for the Box S, had reported that the sentiment in town, though cautious of expressing itself, had made a shift favorable to the Sloans since the attack upon the brothers. Non-partisans had always doubted the justice of Sumner's conviction and even others not so friendly felt that the attempt to murder him the very hour of his arrival had been outrageous. There were dissenters. The *News* had come out with a slanted account of the fight and an editorial putting the blame for the death of Shonsey on the Sloans. Those in the county knew that Jim Barkley was a political dependent of Anse Cottrell, but unfortunately he was the correspondent for the Tucson and Phoenix papers and had sent them a colored story. No doubt issues of these papers had been forwarded to the Overland in New York. If the railroad head men could be persuaded the Sloans were desperadoes it might influence their decision as to the route of the line.

Randolph did not take the desert road to Round Top lest he meet somebody who might hurry to his enemies with the news he was in town. He skirted the edge of the foothills across a country seamed with gullies, dry arroyos bounded by land spikes shooting out from the range above. Out of the lush darkness the mountains came vague and shadowy. The warm night, soft as velvet, was roofed by a sky of stars. He rode in and out among the green foliage of the huisache and the mesquite bushes.

At the foot of a slope dotted with sahuaros he passed the walls of a deserted adobe house already crumbling back to the earth from which they had come. The scene looked so like a graveyard that a shiver ran through him. The law of the desert is that it always claims its own again in the end. Flowers die. Water in irrigation ditches ceases to flow. The cholla becomes desiccated and shrunken. Human habitations fall into decay and mingle with the dust. Here were buried the hopes of somebody who had built that house. Where had he gone? Was he among the living or the dead?

He came into the town from a gully at the end of which was a grove of live oaks festooned with parasitic mistletoe. Here he tied and on foot circled the back yards of houses till he came to the one in which the banker lived. In the shadow of the wall he waited, listening for any sounds within the house that might tell him whether Webber had company. A man's high-heeled boots clicked a staccato beat on the sidewalk in front of the place. He walked lightly, a tilted flat-crowned white hat on his head. He was whistling "Sweet Marie." Rog Appleton, the cowboy who had sided Hod Crane in the fight the other day. The sound of his footsteps died away before Randy softly took the steps of the gallery and looked into the parlor. Brad was sitting in a big chair with his shoes and coat off reading a newspaper. His wife was in a rocker knitting on the other side of the table.

Randy tapped gently on the window. Brad lowered his paper and listened. He heard the tapping again. The banker came to the window, looked out, and at once drew down the curtain. He opened the door and Sloan followed him into the room.

Mrs. Webber was a plump motherly woman with bright eyes and snowy white hair, not yet past middle age. She had always liked Randy. A friend of his mother, she had known him since he was a baby.

He kissed her. Before he sat down he made sure that both of the window curtains were down.

After a word of greeting she told him to tell her about Sumner. Was he changed? In good health? And was he bent on getting into trouble again? She broke into his answers to say indignantly, "I think it's terrible the way those awful men tried to kill you both. I told Anse Cottrell he ought to be ashamed for having any truck with that Dan Duff."

"Dan has been useful to him through the years," Randolph reminded her dryly. "Against those wild Sloans."

With some embarrassment the banker mentioned the reason why he had asked Randolph to call on him secretly.

"I want to protect you on that note that comes due Tuesday," he said. "If Anse foreclosed you would have a chance of redemption later, but it is better not to let it go that far. I have three thousand dollars loose and I am going to lend it to you."

Randolph felt a warm glow of gratitude. Webber was not a rich man and could not afford to lose the money.

"You'll be taking a chance, Brad."

Jane Webber smiled at their visitor, her fingers still busy with the knitting. "You'll pay us back," she said confidently.

"If I live." Randolph added, a little huskily: "You don't know how much this means to me. I'll never forget it."

"You can give me a mortgage on the property," Brad explained. "But I won't be able to record it. Fact is, Anse has got the dead wood on me right now and he would bust me higher than a kite if he knew about this. It has to be a secret. You understand that?"

"May I tell Sumner? He's close-mouthed as a clam."

"Yes. But nobody else." Webber flushed, a flare of anger in his eyes. "I ought to do this right out in the open and tell that old vampire where he gets off, but if I did he would ruin me certain. When I was your age I would have told him to go to hell."

"Now Brad," his wife cautioned. "Don't get het up about it. You have to do business with Anse whether you like him or not."

"I know. I know." Webber's voice held impatient scorn. "I have to play man Friday and not blow my top."

The banker had drawn up the papers and Sloan signed them. Webber walked to the bookcase and took a package of greenbacks from back of a set of Scott. This he gave to Randolph.

"Why do you do this for me?" the rancher asked. "Ask a man on the street about me and he'll tell you I'm a young rapscallion not to be trusted, a dog with a bad name."

"I knew your father and I know you." Webber smiled wryly. "And I'd like to put a spoke in the wheel of that fine Christian character Anse Cottrell."

"I reckon you know how much I thank you," Randolph said, and rose to go.

Jane Webber put aside her knitting and took Sloan's hand in both of hers. "Isn't there any way to stop this dreadful fighting, Randy? These ruffians nearly killed you this time. I'm afraid for you. They won't stop, not after Gus Shonsey's death. It will be with you like it was with your father and your brothers. I wish you would sell out and leave soon as you can."

He shook his head. "I can't do that. But I promise you that if they let us alone there won't be any fighting. Sumner and I stand together on that."

A sense of their friendship went with him when he left and it warmed his heart.

Backtracking along the way he had come, he saw a light in Nora Hamilton's house. Since the day of Sumner's return he had not seen her. He knocked on the door at the rear and Nora asked who it was.

"A young fellow making a call," he answered. "He's been introduced to you, so it's all right."

She opened the door, her eyes shining. "Come in," she said.

"You'll get a bad name if I do," he warned, smiling at her.

"I've already got it." After the door was closed she asked, "Does anybody know you are in town?"

"Nobody who would harm me."

"What are you doing here?"

"I came on business, and I thought I would add a little pleasure. A friend of mine lives in this house."

He wore his gay youth so jauntily she could not take her gaze from him. Her pulses began to beat faster and she was afraid gladness would show in her face. She loved the careless ease of this slender brown man on whom the brand of the outdoor West was stamped so indelibly, the more because she knew that beneath this debonair front there was a sun-and-wind-bitten maturity dependable as steel. And with her deep interest in him went a sense of guilt. She had no right to care so much for any man.

"Is your wound doing all right?" she asked.

"It was only a fleabite."

"If Julia and her brother had not interfered —— "

"You might have had a chance to send flowers."

"Their father has a notice in the paper today censuring all who had a part in the fight and urging everybody to settle difficulties lawfully."

"Anse is a grand character," he said dryly. "Bill I respect. If things were different I could like him for a friend."

"And Julia?"

He tilted a wry grin at Nora. "I'm dirt under her lovely feet."

"Yet she helps to save your life."

"Will you tell me why?" Before she could answer he attempted one himself. "She hates the feud and all this killing. I think she has come to distrust her father and though she despises me she doesn't want his gun slingers to murder me. She is undisciplined and impulsive, and in her pride there is a sort of gallant generosity. It runs in her wild temper."

"You have thought about her a great deal, and your interest is keener because she is beautiful."

"I don't deny that," he agreed.

"Are you in love with her?"

He laughed. "You women! It would be romantic, wouldn't it? Capulet and Montague all over again."

"I'd better tell you that she has just become engaged to Mr. Bancroft."

"They are well matched. The news will not keep me awake nights."

"You are wrong about Julia despising you. She doesn't."

"Does it matter? She is outside of my life. I have troubles enough without worrying about a woman."

"Yes," she said. "We women are so helpless. I am your friend, you say, but I can do nothing to help you solve your troubles."

She was wearing a blue muslin dress that fitted perfectly the long lines of her slim rounded figure. Her fine eyes held gifts in them. He thought, *She is not much more than a girl, but her past has closed in on her and fenced her from life. She fights against happiness.*

"Queer how blind a man can be," he said. "Before I knew you I thought you were plain."

Nora felt color warming her cheeks. "You were not blind," she answered. "I look in the mirror sometimes."

"Often you are beautiful. Just now for instance."

"Please — please," she begged.

It was strongly in his mind that this was the time to break through the barrier of silence she had built and probe her secret. If she lived with it alone long enough it would destroy her.

"Turn about is fair play," he said lightly. "I'll put the same question to you that you have just asked me. Have you ever been in love?"

She flinched as if he had struck her. Her answer came reluctantly. "I thought so — once — for a few days. I found out soon I was wrong."

"You had better tell me about it," he said gently.

She told him. When she was fifteen her mother died and left her with no relative except one brother. He was a ne'er-do-well who did not want to work and hung around race tracks and poolrooms picking up a dollar here and there while she served as a waitress in a Harvey House. One of his cronies was a neatly built flashy young man who called himself Cash Fentry, a character more sophisticated than her brother, more adept at shady practices, and with a good deal of surface charm. Fentry paid a lot of attention to her and since she was then only seventeen and unused to suitors she was flattered and attracted to him.

Presently her eyes were opened to the fact that he was no honest lover seeking a girl for his wife. She drew back shocked at his importunity. Pressing his advances, he began to drop around to the house in the absence of her brother Ned. She had another cause of worry. There was much low-voiced talk between the men which ceased whenever she came into the room. She felt sure they were planning something that was wrong.

One day a factory pay clerk was held up and robbed on his way from the bank. Nora caught sight of Ned with a roll of bills. His explanation was that he had made a lucky odds-on bet at a race meet.

Fentry came to the house the night of the robbery and she went to bed leaving the two men downstairs. It was perhaps an hour later that she was aroused from sleep by the sound of shots below. Nora ran downstairs in her nightgown and saw Ned standing over the body of Fentry with a revolver in his hand. He was white as a sheet and trembling violently. The men had quarreled over the division of the spoils. Within a few moments neighbors crowded into the house. Wholly unnerved, Ned jumped at the only defense he felt might save him. Fentry had ruined his sister, he said, and the man had attacked him when faced with an accusation of his guilt. He had come into the house and found Fentry with his sister, the girl in her nightgown. Some color was given this story, since it was a hot night and Fentry had taken off his coat and vest.

At the trial it was proved the two men had robbed the clerk, but two or three neighbor women testified they had more than once seen Fentry going to the house in the absence of Ned. To save her brother's life Nora confessed on the stand that she had been the mistress of Fentry. Ned was given twenty years in the penitentiary.

"Your brother is still in the penitentiary?" Randolph asked.

"Yes. He has been there four years."

"Do you write to him?"

"Yes. He never answers."

"You've had a raw deal," Sloan said. "But it need not ruin your life. He's no good, or he wouldn't have sacrificed you to save himself. Forget the past. Some nice young fellow will want to marry you. Be ready for him."

She shook her head. "I'm damaged goods."

He dissented vigorously. "That's plumb foolish. You are as fine a girl as I know."

His championship warmed her heart. It had been years since she felt so nearly happy. She had a friend who believed in her.

"He is my brother," she said. "I had to save him from being hanged."

"You were caught in a trap, but you mustn't let it get you down. It will work out if you don't lie down and quit." His white teeth flashed in a smile. "I'm talking to Randy Sloan as well as to you. Sum and I are trapped too — by a set of circumstances we can't duck. So we have to stand up to them."

"Yes," she agreed.

He did not kiss her this time before leaving, but his handshake was warm and strong.

14

WHEN Randolph came out of Nora's house into the alley the night was not so dark as it had been. A full moon had risen and countless stars sprinkled the sky. As he headed for the grove of live oaks where he had left his horse he was thinking of the story Nora had told him. He accepted it fully. While still little more than a child she had been betrayed by a weak and worthless brother and by a combination of circumstances that had imposed on her the harsh condemnation of society.

The hoot of an owl wrenched his mind back to instant wariness. That sound had come from a human throat. His stomach muscles tightened. A picture took form, of a signal being flung to men waiting for him in the live oaks. Somebody had run across his horse by chance and carried word to his enemies.

Crouching, he scuttled for the shelter of a deserted adobe hut. A rifle coughed before he plunged back of a wall. He stumbled over somebody kneeling there. A startled voice let out a yelp.

Instantly Sloan clinched with a squirming body.

Violently moving arms and legs tried to throw him off. They struggled furiously, at too close quarters to use their weapons. Each realized that this was a two-handed rough and tumble with life at stake. They clung to each other rolling over and over. By the light of the moon Sloan recognized his opponent, Rog Appleton. They fought in silence except for the whistling of their breathing and the scuffle of their shifting feet.

Using all his strength Randolph swung on top and spread his legs to get set. Appleton's torso heaved up and twisted right and left. He was gulping air into his lungs hungrily. His fingers reached for his foe's eyes. To protect himself from the gouging Randolph buried his face in the man's chest and found the fellow's throat with his strong fingers. The pressure was unbearable. There was a gurgle in Appleton's gullet. His hands flopped to the ground and he collapsed.

Sloan heard the sounds of men stirring in the live oak grove. They were becoming aware that something had gone wrong. A voice called cautiously, "Rog." A man came out of the clump of trees. He stilted forward slowly in high-heeled boots, a rifle in his hands. He stopped, his gaze sweeping the moonlit open. "What's doing, Rog?" he demanded. The man was Duff. Another man showed, far to the left, and then a third flanking Duff on the other side.

Randolph did not want them any closer. He dropped a bullet a few yards in front of Duff. The sound of the answering shots crashed into one another. The slugs slapped into the adobe wall and sent dirt flying.

Appleton was coming to life. Randolph flung the man's rifle and revolver through the empty window frame into the house. It was time to be gone before his enemies surrounded him. An *acequia* dry for years ran back of the adobe cabin, but he had to cross an open stretch of a dozen yards to reach it. A bullet plumped into the dirt at his feet as he raced for it. He dived into the ditch, his shoulder plowing into the sand.

Duff's raucous voice cut into the night. "He's in the ditch. Head him off from the lower end, Clint. We've got him."

A flash of yellow fire ripped the darkness.

That he was trapped Randolph knew. In the bright moonlight he dared not leave the cover offered by the brush in the *acequia.* If he crept along it in either direction he would find a man guarding the exit. There were at least two rifles in the party in addition to the one Appleton had carried. To fling away that Winchester had been a mistake. They could shoot him down before he was in revolver firing distance. But he could not crouch there like a sitting duck and wait for them to find him. Better choose the lesser of two evils.

He did the thing they would least expect, crept out of the ditch through the willows to try for the shelter of the adobe he had just left.

"Come outa yore hole with yore hands up, you damned wolf," Duff shouted.

He came out fast, to their complete surprise. He was halfway to the shack before the guns roared. Appleton was sitting propped against the wall, strangling sounds coming from his throat, but the running man paid no attention to him. Sloan flung himself through the window opening and landed on the dirt floor. His searching fingers found the rifle. Given luck, he had a fighting chance now.

A rifle cracked again, a shot sent at random.

Appleton's croaking voice protested. "Wait till I get outa here, fellows."

"Get a move on you then," LePage cried.

Sloan heard the shuffling feet of Appleton leaving. He wanted the ambushers to know how well armed he was.

"Much obliged for your Winchester, Rog," he called.

The man did not answer, but Randolph knew he would carry the warning to his confederates. They would think twice before they tried to dig him out of the hut. He had been a chump to leave here in the first place, but in the confusion of the moment his instinct had been to make a run for an escape. By rectifying that error he had shifted the odds in his favor. He was out of the trap. Duff would have to move fast before the firing aroused the town or else give up the attack.

LePage had shifted his position and was pouring bullets through the other window of the house. Dirt from the wall spattered over Sloan where he crouched in a corner. When the firing had died down for a few moments he risked two shots in the direction of LePage. He did not expect to score a hit but only to discourage his foes.

Over to the left back of Duff two revolvers sounded. Randolph heard Duff's alarmed shout. "Goddlemighty, there are more of 'em."

The beat of the fellow's running feet could be heard. He was leading a retreat. In a matter of seconds the pounding of horses' hoofs diminishing in the distance told Randolph that the fight was over.

"Where you at, Randy?" a voice demanded.

The besieged man walked to the door. "They jumped me, Sum. How come you here?"

Tim Jolly and Morgan Vance were with Sumner. Morgan said petulantly, "I'll be ding busted if you'd ought to be let out without a nurse."

"Somebody must have run across my horse in the grove, read the brand, and carried word to Duff," Randolph answered in mild apology. "They would have got me too if I hadn't heard their scout give the signal I was coming. I never was gladder to see anybody than you boys."

"Fact is, after you left I got to worrying," Sumner said. "So we forked our broncs and came in. You all right?"

"Yes. I've got some good news for you later."

"The best news is seeing you alive."

"Get any of 'em?" Jolly asked.

"No. I left some souvenir marks on Rog Appleton's throat where I choked him."

"Looks like that bully-puss crowd must sleep with their thumbs on the triggers of their guns," Morgan grumbled. "If they don't get religion right sudden we'll have to dust 'em off certain."

"That sidewinder Duff!" Jolly exclaimed. "He's livin' on borrowed time. I took a crack at him. Missed him by a mile, but he sure cut dirt for anywhere but here."

They found Randolph's horse where he had left it.

"Got to speak to a lady," Randolph explained, and led the party through an alley between two buildings to the square.

They stopped in front of the Hamilton store. The Sloans swung from the saddles, walked up the path, and Randolph knocked.

"That tough nut Randy back again," he called.

Nora came to the door. She stood with a hand against the jamb for support. Her legs were weak and her face chalk-white in the moonlight.

"I thought — I was afraid ——" she began, and choked before reaching the end of the sentence.

"Not this time," Randolph replied with a grin. "But they tried hard enough before my friends scared them off. Miss Hamilton, this is my brother Sumner."

"I'm glad to meet you," Nora said, holding out her hand. She smiled, wanly. "Can't you do anything about this brother of yours? I never see him that he isn't being shot at."

"We're figuring on hog-tying him and fastening the rope to the porch at the ranch," Sumner told her.

"All that shooting," the young woman said. "Before he had gone fifty yards from the house." Fear still filled her eyes. She was seeing him lie crumpled on the ground, all the splendid vitality stricken from his limp body.

"We stopped to tell you it was all right," Randolph mentioned cheerfully, and followed this by an oblique reference to her own situation. "It just shows you can usually find a way out of any trap you fall into."

As they traveled across the desert, Jolly and Vance twenty yards in front of them, Sumner slanted an inquiring look at his brother.

"I suppose you know that girl is in love with you," he said, breaking a long silence.

"You're 'way off," Randolph promptly retorted. "We're good friends. Nothing more."

"That's your story, but it don't go with me. Who is she? When I left she wasn't living here."

Randolph gave Sumner some edited information, enough to make it clear he sympathized with Nora and wholly trusted her. He did not mention that her brother was still in prison convicted of a murder presumed to have been induced by her immorality. Noting the enthusiasm of Randy's defense, Sumner commented dryly. "Hell, you've got it bad as she has. There's a cure for that. No law against gettin' married in this territory, is there?"

"You buzzard head, I got no idea of marrying her," Randolph flared. "Can't a guy be nice to a girl getting a raw deal?"

"Sure he can," Sumner answered. "And like I said he can even marry her."

15

FLANKED by Cully Ducret his employer walked into the bank and lumbered across the floor to the inclosure where Brad Webber had his desk. Anse Cottrell was not expecting trouble in broad daylight but it was better to be prepared. He always carried a concealed .44 himself and in spite of his weight he was fast on the draw. Yet he felt safer to have by his side Ducret. The Texan had a reputation so fearsome that other bad men sidestepped any altercation with him.

There was no telling how wrought up the Sloans were by that fool Duff's repeated attacks on them. The blundering lunkhead had cut loose on his own and was scoring nothing but failures, yet to protect themselves his enemies would be bound to strike back soon. Before he had been sent to prison Sumner had been known as a dangerous fighting man. It was not likely that years of brooding behind bars had made him less bitter.

Old Anse had it in mind that Sumner was the only man who had ever shot it out with Ducret and had the best of it. He warned his guard in a low voice that no guns were to be drawn unless the Sloans were on the prod.

Cottrell pushed into the inclosure and drew up a chair. He settled his shapeless body into it. "Like as not they won't show up," he snarled. "Why would they since they haven't got a nickel to satisfy the note?"

"I think they'll be here," Webber replied mildly. "I saw them go into Stump's store a few minutes since."

"Both of 'em?" Anse asked.

"Yes."

"Anyone else with 'em?"

"No. I don't think they are here to start anything."

"They had better not. I'll not take much more. I won't let them hurrah this town, not after what they did Tuesday night — piling in here to kill innocent citizens."

The banker made no comment. He did not care to start an argument. In a few minutes Anse was going to be furious enough without any more help on his part.

Through the window Webber caught sight of the Sloans on the sidewalk. They came into the bank.

Webber said, "Come right in, boys, and take those two chairs." He held the gate open for them.

The brothers stayed outside the railed office. "We won't need chairs, Brad," Sumner said. His cold hard eyes were fastened on the half-shuttered ones of Ducret. The two had not met since the day of their duel on the courthouse square half a dozen years earlier.

This was true of Anse and the Sloans too. He had not stood face to face with them for many months. The last time he had seen Sumner was when the young man was being sentenced to the penitentiary. A sly sense of triumph stirred in him. He had them whipped and was about to take their home from them.

"You Sloans have got nobody to blame but yoreselves for the fix you're in," he said, his smile oozing malignity. "I warned yore father and yore uncle Tracy, but they were hell-bent on ruining me. Now you are scraping the bottom of the barrel. I aim to be forgiving like the good book tells me to." He took a wallet from his pocket and slowly counted out some bills, putting them into two piles of twenty-five dollars each. "That will get you-all out of this territory before outraged citizens hang you to a live oak if you hit the trail fast."

Randolph said quietly, an ironic bite to his voice, "You're generous."

"I'll expect you to give me a quit-claim deed to yore land, seeing it's practically mine anyway." He read a contemptuous refusal in Randolph's face and a dull flush beat into his cheeks. "This country is tired of having you ride around robbing stages and killing citizens. You're through."

Sumner was watching Ducret closely, his jaw muscles hard as steel. He let his younger brother do the talking.

"Not quite," Randolph answered. "Get over the idea that you are God, you fat slug. We're here to pay that mortgage note. Where is it?"

The beady eyes of Cottrell shifted from one of the Sloans to the other, a startled doubt in them. But a moment's reflection told him they could not possibly have the money. He slapped the note down on the desk. "I'll not take on account a nickel less than the whole amount. Lemme see you dig it up."

Without shifting his gaze from Ducret Sumner drew from a hip pocket a tobacco sack bulging with bills. He handed it to Randolph who counted out three thousand dollars and then added one hundred and twenty for six months' interest at eight per cent.

Cottrell stared at the money as if hypnotized. He raised his eyes to glare at Randolph. "Where did you get this?" he demanded hoarsely.

Young Sloan spoke evenly, "Will you examine the bills and see that they are not counterfeit, Mr. Webber?" he said.

Webber did so. "It's good money," he answered.

"I won't accept it," Anse cried, his face a map of rage. "You got it from that stage robbery near Blue Creek where you killed Watt Saulsbury. There's blood on it. You can't pay a debt to me with it."

Randolph's anger left him ice-cold. "I gave this mortgage to the bank, Mr. Webber. You have seen me offer to pay the note. I'll leave the money with you in the bank and ask for a receipt and a statement that the offer has been made."

To Cottrell Webber said, "You'll have to take the money, Anse. It's a legal proffer. If you don't I have no option but to give Randy a receipt for it."

"Where did he get it?" Anse repeated, fury boiling in him.

"You'll never know," Randolph answered. "It's none of your business. Take it or leave it."

Cottrell took it. There was nothing else for him to do. He scrawled on the face of the note, *Paid in full with money robbed from the Blue Creek stage after Watt Saulsbury was murdered.* Beneath this he signed his name. Webber picked up the paper and read with startled eyes what was written on it.

"For God's sake, Anse," he exclaimed.

Randolph took the note from the banker. His lean face tightened. These were fighting words, written by a man whose implacable hate had suddenly become unleashed against his better judgment. Young Sloan fought down the surge of passion that poured through him. If he repeated the challenge aloud guns would blaze instantly. Sumner and Ducret would accept them as a signal for battle.

He asked quietly, "Is this a legal receipt, Brad?"

Webber's frozen face relaxed. Randolph had chosen not to force a fight now. "It's legal enough," the banker said.

The cat eyes of Ducret, deceptively sleepy, slid contemptuously toward Cottrell. He knew only that the note had been signed. In spite of his big talk Anse was accepting defeat. The Texan had not spoken a word since coming into the bank. He said nothing now but his employer knew the man was waiting for a signal. Cottrell did not give it. His sly caution was uppermost now dominating the wild impulse that had driven him to forget his old policy of playing safe. Arrogant and ruthless though he was, he preferred to take as few chances as possible. Without pity he had harried nesters from the water holes they had homesteaded. His riders had torn down fences, trampled crops, and fired houses. More than one poor settler had found a grave in dry gulches under piles of stone because of obstinacy. But these two men were a different breed from the hunted nesters he had rubbed out. They were no easy run-of-the-range covered-wagon drifters.

The gaze of Anse shuttled from one to the other and he read them aright as dangerous. From Sumner's lean bitter face looked out gray eyes that told of a spirit hammered hard as steel by the experiences he had endured. In his younger brother was a stark fighting fire that only death could defeat. In driving them to a battle on even terms there could be no profit. Ducret was incredibly swift on the draw. He would get one of them, perhaps both, but very likely not before a bullet was pumped into Cottrell's big body.

Brad spoke evenly. "No need for hard feelings, gentlemen. This is only a business matter. Randy borrowed the money and now is paying it back. Nothing wrong with that."

Anse pushed back his chair, the legs grating harshly on the floor. He got to his feet and glared at Randolph, a hot devil of hate in his eyes. The gross body looked more than ever like a swollen toad.

"You've gone bad just like that jail brother of yours," he ground out, teeth clenched back of the thin lips that made a slit in the evil face. "Bad blood, the whole pack of you. I've been holdin' back a bunch of fellows set to rub you out like they would wolves, but I won't protect you any longer. They can go to it, and I wish them luck."

"You're a little excited, Anse," Webber told him. "Take it easy."

"We'll do our own protecting, as we've been doing," Randolph flung out curtly. "Warn your killers we've had enough."

Ducret spoke for the first time, his half-shuttered eyes on Sumner. The words dripped from his mouth almost in a murmur. "Some other day — soon."

A light step sounded on the sidewalk. Julia walked into the bank. Sensitive to atmospheres, she was instantly aware of a tensity close to the breaking point. Wisely she disregarded this. "Saw you through the window and wanted to remind you of your appointment with John," she told her father.

He grunted a surly acknowledgment.

Julia wondered what had brought these men into the same room. Certainly it was not a peace conference. Lightly, to relieve the strain, she said, "Don't let me interrupt this happy reunion."

Anse snorted angrily. "We're gettin' outa here."

The girl's glance touched Randolph and rested on him. A clamor of the blood born of physical urge both drew them together and repelled them. No other man had ever stirred her so. This angered her and she wanted to trample it down. She kept telling herself that he was a pest, a trouble breeder, and an insolent outlaw, but she knew she did not believe it. His smile, ironic and cool, annoyed her. It discounted her arrogant pride, as if she were a child in a tantrum.

Her self-willed beauty was amazingly vital. Randoph thought, *She is all fire and passion. If she loved a man she would keep him either in heaven or hell.*

"You're not interrupting, Miss Cottrell," he said. "We have come to a complete understanding."

Anse Cottrell's fingers closed on the arm of his daughter and forced her to keep pace with him to the door.

As soon as they were out of hearing she asked, "What did he mean by saying you have reached an understanding?"

"Never mind what he meant." His voice was thick with rage. "Keep outa this. He's made his choice. The man is as good as dead."

"No," she cried. "You can't do that to him. I won't have it."

Cottrell had not meant to say so much. He had let anger sweep away discretion. It had been an unwise threat and he covered it with an explanation. "Don't try to bully me, you little fool. I'm not going to harm him. But he has declared war on Duff and his friends. They'll never let him live after his repeated attacks on them. I told him to leave — begged him to go. He's got hell in the neck, he and his brother both. They'll shoot their way into graves."

Julia did not more than half believe him. She begged her father to serve notice on Duff that there must be no more killing but Anse stormed her into silence. He had done all he could for the Sloans but they were bad and violent men. He would not lift another hand for them.

The banker watched the Cottrells leave, a worried frown on his face. "Anse is going to make trouble for you," he said.

"Nothing new about that," Sumner mentioned bitterly. "He's been doing that for more than twenty years."

Before the day was over Webber knew that Cottrell was beginning his renewed attack on the Sloans by a poison campaign. Three men at different times told him they had heard Randy Sloan had paid off one of his mortgage notes with money stolen at the Blue Creek stage robbery a year earlier.

After leaving the bank the brothers moved along the sidewalk to Stump's store in front of which their mounts were tied to a hitch rack. Already word had spread that they had been seen going into the bank a few minutes later than Cottrell and Ducret. Men in stores and saloons on the square had been waiting with tense excitement for the crash of guns. Now curious gazes rested on the tall lean-flanked ranchmen whose craggy faces told them nothing. There was a driving force in their long reaching strides. A month ago the Sloans had been a whipped outfit. Round Top was not so sure of that any longer. A lot of guns had hammered at them since then and they were still alive and there was talk that their kin and former supporters were rallying to aid them.

As they jiggled out of town at a road gait they discussed what had just taken place.

"We're lucky to be out of it alive," Randolph said. "I felt right uneasy."

"Me too. That slit-eyed son of a gun Ducret was itchin' to turn loose his cutter on us. We had nigger luck he didn't, seeing how you and Old Anse were cussin' each other out."

"I had to talk back to him after he began but two-three times I was scared smoke was going to bust loose."

"You took a lot from him when he claimed you were in the Blue Creek holdup," Sumner said.

"I took more than you know." The younger brother drew from his pocket the canceled note and handed it to Sumner.

The face of the older Sloan flushed angrily. "Why didn't you show me this?" he demanded. "The old wolf was asking for war."

"Yes, he was crazy mad for the moment. But he didn't really want it, not after he had written it. If I had showed it to you then some of us would have been dead in ten seconds."

"You have to turn this note in at the courthouse to get the mortgage release. Everybody in town will know what he called you and that you took it like a whipped cur."

"They'll know what we want them to know, that Anse is crowding us. His riffraff have tried three times to murder us. That's another thing they know. The feud is on again. We can't help that. Men are going to be killed. What stands out like a bandaged thumb is that the Cottrells are forcing us into a fight. He has been the big mogul in the county, but he has lost a lot of prestige. That's why he was so furious, that and because by paying the note we balked his plan to take over our property. He won't give up of course, but he sure doesn't like the setup as it stands."

"What will he do?"

"You guess. I don't know. He figures like I do that the Overland will come our way and make the Bigg's Bend country very valuable. He is bound and determined to get our land. Since he has to stand in with business-men who don't like murder my guess is that for a few weeks anyhow he will call off Duff and his killers. If he can put us in bad first with the public he will do it. That's just a guess. He may order Ducret to cut loose his wolf and shoot us down from ambush regardless of what people will think."

"A nice prospect," Sumner said morosely. "Maybe Tubbs and Putnam are right. The only way to fight a rattlesnake is to kill it. If there is going to be any bushwhacking done or any traps laid we'd better beat Old Anse to it."

"We've been doing pretty well so far, haven't we?" Randolph asked. "Let's fight it out on that line long as we can."

Sumner looked at him, not without admiration. "Kid, you take the cake. Looks to me like you're trying to ride two horses going different ways. You're a hell-a-miler in a fight and then you are mild as buttermilk. But you talk us all into following your lead. All right, boy. Hop to it."

"Maybe I'm wrong," Randolph said with a warm boyish smile.

Sumner said that right or wrong he would back Randy's play.

16

ANSE found John Bancroft at the courthouse discussing with the county assessor an adjustment of the Sure Fire taxes. The old man took a chair and waited impatiently for them to finish. Payment on the mortgage note had been a blow to him, a totally unexpected one. It meant not only an obstacle to his taking over the Bigg's Bend properties but stressed also the revival of the Sloan power. Anse had not become the dominant man in the community without making enemies and stirring jealousies. That he had ridden roughshod over the rights of others made little difference to him so long as his supremacy was unchallenged but already he could see on the faces of men he met sly smiles of satisfaction at the issue of the gun fights between his adherents and the Sloans.

Bancroft finished his business and walked with Cottrell out of the courthouse.

"Julia says you have something important to tell me," Anse mentioned.

"Yes. When I'm sure we're alone." Bancroft turned toward Knob Hill, a sugarloaf butte rising from the end of Jeff Davis street.

They were halfway up it before he stopped.

"I had a letter this morning from my uncle Miles Hancock," he said. "This is an absolute secret. I'm in on it only because of certain arrangements I have to make for him at Chrysolite. It is decided that the railroad is to come by way of Bigg's Bend and that there will be a division point there. Better get hold of the Sloan property before they get wise."

"Fine," Cottrell answered bitterly. "Half an hour ago they paid off the mortgage note on the home property."

"Thought they were poor as church mice."

"I'm satisfied this was some of the money stolen at the Blue Creek stage robbery. There is no other way they could have got it."

"All right. Arrest young Randolph. You have evidence against him. To be convicted of a stage robbery would take some of the cock-a-doodle-do out of that young man."

"That would suit me down to the ground. But I'm afraid right now a jury wouldn't convict him. Duff is so unpopular that a lot of softheaded people are making a hero out of the Sloans."

"Then buy them out lock, stock, and barrel. I'll go in with you on that. But move quick. If they get word the railroad is coming to them they won't let go of it."

"They won't let go of it anyhow if they can help it," Anse said sourly. "They're stubborn as Dutchmen."

"Not to you. Maybe they might to me."

Cottrell shook his head. "No chance, not the way things are now."

He knew what he had to do, but he did not intend to discuss it with Bancroft, and before he did it he must build up a situation discrediting the Sloans completely with the public. A germ of a plan was in his mind. He had not worked it out carefully yet. It would take perfect timing and there must not be any loose ends left to unravel. He would have to depend on Duff again. Ducret would not touch it. That was a pity, since Ducret was so much more efficient. It was a strange trait in the Texan that though he was a cold-blooded killer there were lesser crimes he would not commit. The man had a queer stiff pride.

It was two nights later that Cottrell drove out to the Duff ranch. The place lay in a fold of the hills within easy riding distance of the big Quartercircle C which Anse owned and where he had lived until he moved to town. There was no doubt in Cottrell's mind that Duff preyed on his ranch and rustled its calves as he did from other neighboring spreads. It was easy by a deft touch or two of a running iron to change the ⌒C into a Ⓓ. This galled Anse greatly, but in spite of his thrift he put up with the rustling because Duff was so useful to him. The big man told him bluntly that this was part of his pay for services rendered since Cottrell was so niggardly with his money. He always said this with a sneer and though Anse quarreled with him about it he made no effort to press the charges.

The clump of buildings and the yard littered with wornout tools and ramshackle vehicles made an ugly splash in the pretty cove backed against the rock wall of a ridge. A light showed in the one-room log cabin of the ranchman.

Before descending from the saucer rim Anse made sure of an easy draw from the holster at his side. Duff was a hot-tempered man quick on the trigger and of late he had been unusually restive in his relations with Cottrell. Neither of them liked the other. Only the fact that the alliance was profitable to both held them together.

Cottrell drew up fifty yards from the cabin and yelled, "Hello the house!" Duff had heard the grinding of the wheels coming down the slope of disintegrated granite and already had a rifle in his hands. He called back, "Who's there?"

Anse gave his name and drove forward. The big man in the doorway asked gruffly, "What in hell brought you here?"

"I've got a little information you might like to have," Cottrell replied, and added dryly, "I haven't heard you say, 'Light and come in.'"

"All right, I'm saying it," Duff tossed at him, as if it were a bone to a dog.

Anse tied and walked into the house. It looked like a rat's nest. The bed had not been made and the blankets were soiled. Boots, underwear, a broken bridle, torn newspapers, dirty dishes, and cooking utensils containing scraps of food littered the room. The floor was of puncheon and looked as if it had never been swept. Duff flung a pair of muddy jeans from a chair to the bed.

"Sit," he said. "I'm sure grateful to you for bringing me this information whatever it is. I got few friends filled with such loving kindness."

The older man ignored the sarcasm. He had not come to wrangle.

"You'd have a better light if you cleaned that lamp chimney," he said mildly, looking at the glass blackened by the flame.

"Suits me the way it is," Duff retorted. "If that's what you came for you drove a hell of a way to tell me."

"Now Dan, don't go off half cocked," the old man reproved him amiably. "We been friends a long time and that's how I want it."

Duff's splenetic laughter mocked his guest. "Friends! You haven't got one in the world any more than I have. You're out for yoreself, you old vinegaroon. Cut out the suave and come clean."

Cottrell shook his head in discouragement. "You live alone too much, Dan, and it makes you crotchety. Folks are kinder than you think. I'm here to drop a hint how you might pick up a nice little wad of dough."

"Yeah," Duff scoffed. "Go ahead. I'm listening."

Anse leaned forward and tapped the table with a finger as he talked. "The Sure Fire pay roll for two weeks comes in Thursday on the Blue Creek stage. It ought to net you a good deal more than when you held it up last year. You did a good job then. This pay-roll money might as well be yours if you are slick about it."

"Where do you come in on it?"

"I don't. The take is all yours and the boys who work with you."

Duff glared at him. "You've got some scheme in yore noodle. I know you. Spit it out."

"Only this. You've been getting off on the wrong foot in these attacks on the Sloans. Result is, folks have been turning against us. Leave me to handle the Sloans. When the time's right — and it will be soon — I'll take care of them. Pull off this holdup like you did the other, leaving evidence that it is a Sloan job. I've been laying the groundwork so folks will believe they did it to get money to pay off their mortgages. Once people are convinced they are outlaws the general opinion will be that it is better for the district that they be rubbed out."

Duff grudgingly agreed. He could feel his neighbors edging away from him. He was quite willing to leave the Sloans to Anse provided the old man acted before the enemy clan made a move to collect Duff's scalp.

Their heads together across the table, the two talked over details of the proposed holdup. Three men would be enough. They could stop the stage while it was passing through the rocky defile of Randall's Gap. That would be just after darkness had fallen. The road agents need not be away from home more than three hours. As before, they were to make the play that they were from the Box S ranch.

Anse went out to his buggy and brought back with him a weather-beaten hat.

"You ought to be acquainted with this," he chuckled.

Duff stared at it, the slaty eyes in his ugly face bulging with a dawning surprise. He pointed at the two small bullet holes in the crown.

"You mean — that this is Randy Sloan's hat?" he gulped out.

"Right first crack, Dan." Cottrell grinned.

"How did you get it?"

"I paid Shifty Fox twenty dollars to slip into the house at the Box S and get it while all of them were out at work."

"What am I to do with it?"

"Leave it at the entrance to the Gap while you are making your getaway."

"Sure Shifty won't talk?"

"Dead sure. I can send him to the pen by lifting a finger."

Anse went over the whole plot again covering every contingency likely to occur. Before he left the plan was as foolproof as he could make it.

17

MORG VANCE lifted his wrinkled face and squinted up into a blue sky flecked by a few mackerel clouds. "Gonna rain tonight," he said. "I killed a snake and hung it up."

Randolph tightened the saddle cinch and swung into the hull. He smiled at the old-timer. Morgan was full of superstitions.

"It hasn't rained in six weeks," he suggested.

"That's right. We can use a gully-washer certain. My bones feel it hatchin'. . . . Keep yore eyes peeled, son, if you're droppin' in at the store."

"Will do," Sloan promised.

Morg's advice was superfluous. Randy knew that more than most men he existed on an indefinite tenure of life, very likely dependent on a constant vigilance. Like many men of the open frontier he had a sixth sense of danger, an awareness to fugitive impressions. The print of a hoof on a little-used trail, the rumor of a sound carried to him by the wind, the tang of unexpected smoke in the nostrils, the startled flight of birds; these might stir him to instant alertness.

The sun's rays were streaming across the greasewood and heat waves rose from the desert sand. A killdeer flung out its noisy note. In the distance a small bunch of antelope flitted through the brush. The arid land was showing its smiling face, but he knew that life on it was a war. The plants had protective barbs and the reptiles poisonous stings. They struggled for enough water to keep alive. He wondered if from the days of the cave man the human race too had always had to fight to save itself from extinction.

As he rode up to the Cross Roads store he noted three horses at the hitch rack. One of them was a sorrel and carried the Circle D brand. A black with white stockings belonged to LePage. Invisible fingers clutched at his stomach and twisted it into a knot. The men must be watching him from the store. If he remounted to ride away their bullets would tear into his body. He had to walk into the store and show no sign of fear, unsure every foot of the way whether he would reach the entrance.

The men inside watched him tie his mount with a slip knot. He took from the breast pocket of his shirt a sack of tobacco and rolled a cigarette. He lighted it, his fingers steady, and moved forward with a stride lazy and smooth as that of a cat.

"He knows we are here," LePage said.

"Sure. From the broncs." Duff looked irritably at a homesteader's wife who was buying airtights and Arbuckle's coffee. If it had not been for the presence of her and the storekeeper Gauss they could already have shot down Sloan.

"He's got sand in his craw," the third man said. His name was Homer Bascom, a nester under grave suspicion of being a rustler. He was a wiry hook-nosed fellow with bunched eyebrows always lifted as if they were asking a question.

Randy appeared in the doorway. He showed pleasant surprise. "So we meet again," he said, amiably derisive. His eyes picked up the woman. "It's been quite some time since I last saw you, Mrs. Frisby. I'm right glad to have the pleasure."

He could not tell her how glad. So long as she was here there would be no gun smoke.

She smiled at the young man. Most women liked Randy Sloan. "You don't get up our way often," she told him.

"I reckon you want your mail, Randy," Gauss blurted. He was frightened. There was dynamite in this situation and he wanted to keep the talk on the commonplace.

The storekeeper brought a letter and two newspapers to him from a box. Randy lounged against the counter. He opened the Phoenix newspaper and glanced over it. A paragraph with the headline TROUBLE AT ROUND TOP caught his eye. It gave a misleading account of the fight at the adobe house.

Randy handed the paper to Duff. "Little piece about you in the *Republican,* Dan. Maybe you would like to read it. Seems that you and some of your friends were attacked by a bunch of outlaw scalawags who infest this neck of the woods." There was an impudent grin on his lean-jawed face.

Duff had read the account. He tore the newspaper in two and stamped on it. "You'll talk yoreself into a wooden overcoat, fellow," he growled angrily. "I've had a belly-full of you."

The storekeeper glanced nervously at Duff, then back at Mrs. Frisby. He began to talk up the wisdom of laying in a stock of groceries. Prices were going up. He would like to sell her more canned goods before the raise. The same thought was in his mind that Randolph had. While she was in the store there would be no trouble.

Mrs. Frisby was not listening to him. A chill had swept over her. She had a strong desire to get away from here. Her eyes shifted from Duff to young Sloan. Randy was still lounging against the counter, a set grin on his face. She thought, *They are waiting for me to go to kill him.* It came to her that she might save him.

"If you are going home maybe you'll ride with me as far as the cut-off," she said.

For a moment the pressure lifted from Randy. If he left with her they could not touch him. But the stomach muscles tightened again. He could not walk out in the shelter of a woman's skirts.

"Sorry, Mrs. Frisby," he said. "I'll stick around a while."

She could not go out and leave him with these killers. "I've been wanting to talk with you about — about sending Dick to Phoenix for that operation."

"I'll ride up tomorrow morning," he promised.

Though he seemed so much at careless ease, his gaze was fixed on Duff, watching the man, judging him. He gave weight to fugitive impressions, the tone of an enemy's voice, the look in his eyes and what was back of them in his mind. How far Duff was prepared to go at the moment he was not sure. It might depend on whether Anse had given him the word to strike. Even so, he could choose a better time than in the open before witnesses. Though he was in a homicidal mood, neither he nor his companions quite gave the impression of men determined to carry through to a finish.

Randolph's glance swept the lost-dog face of Bascom. The nester was strongly under the influence of LePage but no evil was reflected in his perpetually puzzled countenance. It was a fair guess that he had drifted under the domination of a stronger will.

Better lead the talk into a safer direction, Sloan thought.

"It's going to be all right with Dick's leg, isn't it?" he asked Mrs. Frisby. "The kid will walk without being permanently lame, won't he?"

"We hope so. Doctor Jones thinks he will."

"He's a husky boy," Randy comforted. "A fall from a bronc isn't going to make him a cripple."

LePage had not spoken since Sloan had walked into the building. He strolled toward the front of the store, his long lean body tilting forward as the spurs on the high-heeled boots scuffed along the floor. A slight lift of his head beckoned Duff to join him.

Sullenly Duff followed, backing away from Sloan. LePage whispered in the big man's ear. Duff's sulky face showed a rebellious anger, but he continued to listen to the urging of the other.

He nodded stiffly and rapped out an impatient assent. "All right. All right. But nobody's going to stop me from beatin' him to a rag doll."

LePage shrugged. "That's up to you, I reckon."

Duff straddled forward. "Will you take it here, fellow — or outside?"

The man was a notorious barroom brawler and strong as an ox. He had whipped a dozen men with his fists. His rounded shoulders were immense and the muscles of his arms and legs bulged in knots. Beside him Randolph looked boyish and slight.

There was a bucket of eggs in the aisle and beside it a box of wild plums. "Better beat me outside," the victim suggested. "Or you'll break all these eggs knocking me around."

Mrs. Frisby plucked at Sloan's sleeve. "Do you have to do this, Randy?" she asked in a low voice. "He is so big and strong."

"I have to do it," he told her. "Don't worry. Any guy can take a licking when he has to."

"Quit hangin' back," snarled Duff. "You got the damndest whaling coming I ever handed out."

"All guns left in here with Gauss of course," Sloan said.

"I don't need any gun to bust you in two," the bully boasted.

He put his .45 on the counter, keeping his hand on it until Sloan had laid his down. The other men unbuckled their belts and handed them to the storekeeper.

Duff stamped out of the store. Sloan joined him outside, slipping out of his coat as he did so. The coat he threw over the bar of the scales that stood on the platform. As they faced each other it was evident that the difference in weight between them must be nearly forty pounds. Duff was built solid as a concrete post.

"Dan will eat him up, don't you reckon?" Bascom said.

LePage nodded. "This isn't the kid's lucky day."

Duff came in flatfooted, swinging hard. He had the lumbering awkwardness and the power of a bear. Randy sidestepped and the blow went over his shoulder as his right drove into the belly of the bully. The big man's grunt was good news to his foe. The heavy muscles across the fellow's midriff that once had been a band of steel had softened from the years of heavy drinking.

Swiftly Randy danced away. He knew he could not slug it out and he dared not run the risk of having those great arms girdle his body. It was to his advantage that he was a good boxer. He moved with the ease and grace of a trained athlete. His long flat muscles had the rhythmic flow of a piston rod. But he realized his one chance of victory was in winding Duff and letting him wear himself out.

Duff swarmed all over him, heavy fists hammering at face and body. He lashed out wildly, scorning defense, to finish this quickly. Only Randy's skill in boxing and his swift footwork saved him. Some of the blows he took on his elbows and arms, some he ducked. One hurled him back against the wall of a storeroom. Already his face was bruised and bleeding.

Though Duff's breathing was deep and fast, he charged at once. Randy ducked into the open and backed away. The big fellow's arms were working like the fans of a windmill. A swinging right caught Randy on the cheek and sent him spinning. He was quartering over the ground for safety before Duff could reach him. Though dizzy, he survived the next two or three minutes and felt strength flowing back into him.

Duff relaxed, panting for air, but he kept moving forward. A flailing blow grazed Randy's cheek and he countered hard with a right to the kidneys. Before Duff had recovered he smashed two more into the man's stomach. The man winced and tried to close with him. Randy ducked out of reach and came back fast with a blow to the eye, all the power of his body back of it.

Again Duff plunged at him. He was telegraphing his blows now, wild looping haymakers flung out with no precision. He was blowing like a porpoise. Randy plowed half a dozen blows into his belly and took in return a clout that flung him to the ground. But once more he was up and out of danger before his enemy could reach him. Duff lumbered after him. He stopped, to rip out a curse and demand that Sloan stand and fight.

Randy obliged. He shifted the attack to the man's face, pumping blows that stung and left red bruises. Both of Duff's eyes were swollen, the left one nearly closed. His legs were giving way and the arms so heavy he could scarcely move them fast enough to protect himself against the jolting jabs he was helpless to ward off. Again Randy concentrated on the panting belly.

For the first time Duff gave ground. Sloan saw in the man's eyes that the fear of defeat was riding him. The fury of his baffled rage distorted even more his cut and bleeding face. He groaned when first one fist and then the other slammed into the tire of fat spreading across his soft paunch. His enormous stamina had been sapped by dissipation.

But he shuffled forward on legs that could hardly carry his weight. Randy measured the blow carefully and flung it to the point of the chin. Duff's legs buckled. He swayed and then collapsed. The big body rolled over and he lay still, not senseless but unable to rise.

Randy leaned against a wall, his breath coming with difficulty. He was exhausted, and his face was a map of wheals, cuts, and purpling bruises. In a few hours he would be, he knew, a mass of aches.

Bascom screwed his face into its perpetual bewilderment. "I'll never see anything like this again," he said. "I didn't think there was a guy in Arizona could do it."

Randy walked into the store to recover his revolver. Mrs. Frisby looked at his battered face and said, "You poor dear."

It hurt Randy to grin but he did it. "Keep some sympathy for the other fellow too," he suggested.

She said, with feminine ferocity, "I hope you nearly killed him."

Randy did not comment on that. "I'll ride with you now to the cut-off," he told her.

Duff was getting painfully to his feet when they left. He did not lift his eyes to them. For the present all the bounce was out of the man. He was whipped in spirit more than in body. A deep humiliation depressed him. It had been his boast that no man he had ever met could beat him in a fight, and this boy had hammered him till he was helpless. The shame of it would be a corroding poison in him until he got his revenge.

Randy rode beside the buggy of the young woman. She was in her late twenties and had been married before she was seventeen. But she was still pretty. The dry Arizona wind had not yet drained the roses from her cheeks.

"Isn't there any way to stop this dreadful fighting?" she asked dejectedly. "It took your father and your brother and your uncle. Do we have to lose you and Sumner and others too before it ends?"

Randy found no comfort in his victory. He had hoped that when Sumner came home, with the feud dormant, they could build a new life of peace and order. But he knew now it was not to be that way. He had pleaded with his friends for patience. It had gained them nothing except a shift in public sentiment and a war of bullets that helped little. There came a time when patience became weakness. It seemed that Tubbs and Putnam were right. You could not cope with Cottrell and his leather slappers by being reasonable. They mistook it for timidity. Sumner and he had been lucky, but their luck would not last forever.

At the cut-off Randy and Mrs. Frisby parted. He cut across the cow-backed hills to the ranch headquarters. When he walked in on the men they were just sitting down to dinner. At sight of him Morg jumped up from the bench.

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" he yelped. "You been wrastlin' with a grizzly?"

"I had a little trouble with Duff at the store," Randy answered.

Sumner had risen too. "He jumped you and beat you up?"

"Well, yes and no. We had a fight."

"Tell us," Tim Jolly said. "You sure look like you had been tangling with a wild steer in a bed of cactus."

Randy told the story.

Jolly let out a whoop. "You whipped the big windjammer."

"He whipped himself standing at the bar drinking rotgut," Randy corrected. "And today he could have cleaned up on me if he hadn't been so mad he wore himself out trying to get me in a hurry. He is as strong as ever but his wind is gone and his belly is soft."

Sumner slammed his fist down on the table. "I've had all I'm going to take. Next move old Anse or his gunmen make against us somebody is going out in smoke."

"Looks like it's got to be that way, Randy," Morg agreed.

Randy gave no answer.

18

AS THE STAGE took the long slope to Randall's Gap Hank Main let the horses relax to a walk. He cocked an eyebrow up at the molten sky.

"Looks like this summer is gonna be a humdinger," he complained. "Gets any worse we'll be spittin' cotton." He chuckled. "We got a tenderfoot hillbilly with us today from Kaintucky. Doesn't know sic' 'em. Wanted to know if the hot wind always blows this way. I set his mind at rest about that — told him sometimes it blows the other way. Seems he has a low opinion of Arizona. He was lookin' at Jake Isom's patch of alfalfa back in Blue Creek and kicked because you can't raise anything but alpaca in this country and had to irritate that."

Nate Cleland, the shotgun messenger, grinned. Hank was a character. He could make up an anecdote to suit every occasion.

"We got real high-toned company with us today," Nate said. "John Bancroft and some other city dude from New York with him. They say Bancroft is figurin' on marryin' Julie Cottrell. What I can hear he'll sure be tying up with a li'l wildcat."

"She's got a hell-poppin' temper," Hank admitted. "But, dog my cats, I like her. She's pretty as a new painted wagon and kinda fresh-lookin' like new cut roses. I've seen her eyes ripple with a laugh way down deep in them. She's high-heeled all right, but she treats me fine. Calls me Uncle Hank and plays I can't drive for sour apples — asks me when I'm aimin' to have my next smash-up."

They were drawing into the Gap when a voice snarled "Stick 'em up!" Two men with rifles had stepped from behind boulders into the road.

"Whoa!" Hank called and put his weight on the reins. "Gents, it's all yours," he drawled, still chewing tobacco nonchalantly.

"Drop that scatter gun," the spokesman ordered Cleland. He was a big fellow, masked, and his surly manner urged obedience.

Cleland dropped the shotgun. A third road agent had appeared.

"All out from inside with yore hands up," the outlaw leader snapped. "And you two down from up there."

The passengers tumbled out, the hillbilly in the lead, plainly frightened. After him came John Bancroft, followed by a pale-faced middle-aged man in a high silk hat and a Prince Albert coat of broadcloth. They were lined up in a row and searched. The Kentuckian had only six dollars. He pleaded for them not to take it as he had no more. The smallest bandit handed him back a dollar and advised him to get drunk. From the well-dressed New Yorker they took a purse well stuffed with greenbacks.

"This is an outrage," he protested angrily.

One of the outlaws, a tall lank man, flipped the silk hat from his head, tossed it into the air, and sent three bullets through it before the hat reached the ground.

Bancroft gave up his purse without comment. He observed the robbers carefully. One of them was wearing a hat with two holes in the crown. This he kept in his mind for future reference. Another limped.

The shorter bandit covered the men while the other two carried the strongbox back of the largest boulder in the Gap. After a few minutes there was an explosion. The outlaws returned carrying a gunny sack half filled.

"Stay put where you're at for ten minutes unless you want the top of yore heads blown off," the leader told them.

The long-legged lanky robber brought up three horses from the brush and his companions mounted. As they started down the pass Bancroft dived for the stage and picked up the revolver he had dropped there before leaving it. He whirled and fired at the horsemen. The big one turned in the saddle, raised his rifle, and pulled the trigger. The Kentuckian caught at his side and sank down.

The galloping horses of the holdups disappeared around a bend.

Hank Main exploded at Bancroft, "Haven't you got a lick of sense, with them toting rifles?"

They put the wounded man into the stage and Hank set his horses at a gallop. He had seen wounds before and he knew this one was serious. The Kentuckian's only chance was to get to a doctor as soon as possible. They covered the two miles to town in record time. Hank did not stop to report the robbery but raced past the stage station to the office of Doctor Jones.

Like wildfire the news spread that the stage had been robbed again and a passenger badly wounded. Of those who had seen the robbery Bancroft was the only one who gave information valuable to the sheriff. If Main and Cleland had seen any clew to the identity of the bandits they kept silent about it. It was dangerous for them to know too much, since they would be riding the route every day and the stage was likely to be held up again. One of the outlaws, Bancroft said, had been wearing a hat with two bullet holes in the crown. Another one limped, the smallest of the three.

Both of these bits of evidence pointed to the Box S ranch. The little man who limped must be Morg Vance. The punctured hat was probably the one belonging to Randy Sloan that Duff had shot from his head the night of the dance. That Bancroft's observation had been correct was proved next day when the ventilated hat was picked up among a huddle of rocks near the entrance to the Gap. The posse picked up something else too, a trail that ran direct toward the Soggy and was lost among the rocks about three miles from the Box S.

Anse Cottrell was full of public-spirited zeal. This was an outrageous crime, a blot on the good name of the county. He was busy as a pup hunting fleas. His indignation took him into saloons and stores wherever a knot of men were gathered. The outlaw nest at the Box S ought to be rubbed out. With Sheriff Walsh he did not waste any oratory. It was not necessary. That official had been chosen by him and was his man. He told Walsh to go arrest the Sloan bunch and bring them to town.

The sheriff did not like the assignment. He was a plump soft man and had been all his life a politician. His instinct was to avoid trouble. The last thing he wanted was to tangle with the Sloans. They were too tough for him.

"We ain't hardly got enough on them yet, Anse," he suggested.

"Do you want one of them to come and tell you he did it?" Cottrell jeered. "Plain fact is you haven't got the guts."

"Don't rawhide me. I'm trying to figure what's best to do. I don't want to get a lot of my boys killed."

"You don't want Pete Walsh killed, looks to me."

"If I was plumb sure they had done it I would go after them."

"You'll go after them anyhow. If you don't you'll be a two-spot in this town the rest of your life. I'll see to that." Cottrell softened this with a piece of confidential information. "It's mighty important for the community that you do, Pete. I'll tell you why. Maybe you've heard of Miles Hancock. He's the big mongul back of the Overland. It is his say-so where this spur to the mines is going to run. The day the stage was robbed he was on it with John Bancroft, who is his nephew. Not only did the holdups take the old man's wallet but they shot his plug hat full of holes. He's sore as billy-be-damn and about ready to change the route of the line to cut us off completely. We've got to show him this district doesn't stand for such lawlessness. The only way is to arrest the guilty parties *pronto.* Take a big enough posse and surprise the Sloans. Get the drop on them and they can't fight."

"Easy for you to say that, but you know they're fighting fools," grumbled Walsh. None the less he realized he had to make the arrests. He took the stub of a pencil and after intervals of consideration wrote the names of nine men on the back of an envelope. Five of them were Cottrell relatives.

Anse shook his head. "We don't want this to look like I have a hand in it, Pete. Nothing personal, just the law functioning." He scratched out the names of his kin.

The sheriff gave way sourly. He did not like to be pushed around, and he could not resist one fling at the man slumped in the chair opposite him. "Nobody would suspect a fine citizen like you, Anse, of having a personal motive."

The posse reached the Box S in the early afternoon. It came up cautiously over a hill, to see Randy and Morg driving a bunch of calves into a pasture back of the house. Apparently Sumner and Jolly were not at home, though a saddled pony was tied to the corral fence. The two Box S men watched the posse approach.

By way of greeting Walsh said, "No use you getting annoyed, Randy. I've got to arrest you and Morg."

"What for?" asked Randy. News of the stage robbery and rumors connected with it had reached him and he thought he knew why he was wanted.

"For holding up the Blue Creek stage."

Randy did not protest innocence. He said, "Have you a warrant?"

The sheriff produced one. It called for the arrest of Sumner Sloan, Randolph Sloan, and Morgan Vance for the robbery of the Blue Creek stage.

"A frame-up," Randy said. "We can prove we weren't there."

The face of Walsh set to a sneer. His mind was easier since it was clear young Sloan did not mean to fight. To remove any impression any of the posse might have as to his gameness he decided to get tough.

"You're guilty as hell, Sloan. We've got the goods on you." He snapped a question at his prisoner. "Where is Sum at?"

Randy looked steadily at him. "I reckon Anse will have to be content with two of us for this gather."

"Anse hasn't got a thing to do with this," the sheriff blustered. "I'm the law. Just keep that in mind."

Morg had dismounted to open a gate. He limped across to the sheriff and stared belligerently up at him from beneath the wide low-crowned hat set at a you-be-damned angle. "What Randy is too polite to say to you is that you have to ask Anse can you blow yore nose."

A pimply-faced boy in the posse tittered. The sheriff's pink face reddened.

"That kind of talk don't make friends with me," he said angrily.

Morg flung back an answer instantly, scorn in his chirpy voice. "Who the hell wants to be friends with a putty man?" The eyes in his leathery wrinkled face raked the posse. "A bunch of drugstore Bill Hickoks certain. Nine of you, all loaded down with saddle guns and garnised with hoglegs. It don't look like so few of you heroes will be safe. Better have Anse call out the militia."

"Take his gun from him, Bill," ordered Walsh, speaking to one of his deputies. "If he makes a move we'll cut him down."

"Hands up, Morg," Randy said quickly. "We're not resisting arrest. They won't have that excuse to kill us."

"You know doggoned well we're not aiming to kill you," the exasperated sheriff retorted. "I'm here to uphold the law." He turned to the posse after the Bigg's Bend men had been disarmed. "Bill, you and Cy stay with me to guard the prisoners. The rest of you search the place thorough."

Randy exchanged a glance with Morg. Sumner had left not more than an hour ago to see their uncle Crawford about building a small irrigation ditch, but Tim Jolly was somewhere about the place. He had just finished shoeing a horse when the posse appeared, but had stepped somewhere out of sight.

"Shifty, take Chad with you and go through the house," Walsh ordered. "Don't miss a thing. Maybe you'll find some evidence there."

Randy picked the fuzzy-faced boy from the group. "You go along with them, Bob, and see they don't manufacture that evidence," he said.

"I'm runnin' this posse," the sheriff cried. "You go where I told you, Bob."

Those searching the outbuildings returned and reported that they had found nobody, though there was a fire at the forge showing that somebody had been working there recently. Shifty Fox came out of the house waving a piece of black cloth with two eye holes cut in it.

"Found the mask one of them was wearing," he cried. "Stuck away in a closet back of a lot of stuff."

Morg exploded. "Knew this was a frame-up. Knew it all the time. Nobody ever trusted Shifty Fox far as he could throw a two-year-old by the tail. He wouldn't of been put on a posse except to pull off some dirty trick."

"Pay no attention to the old coot," Walsh said. "I'm leaving six of you boys here to pick up Sumner and Tim Jolly when they show up. The rest of us will take the prisoners to town."

From the hayloft Jolly watched them go. He had been concealed under the hay when one of the posse had come up the ladder and taken a hurried look. If anybody chanced to be there the searcher did not want to find him. The fellow's gun might start smoking.

Tim knew he had to get word to Sumner before his return that men were waiting at the ranch to capture him. The problem was how to get away with six men hanging around the place. His saddled horse was tied to the corral fence not forty yards from the barn but under the guns of the posse men he could not possibly reach it. He would not get a dozen steps before they cut him down. No plan he could think of would get those six out of the yard.

As the minutes dragged into hours and the sun began to sink toward the hills his anxiety increased. Sumner would be coming home soon and the probability was that when the order came for him to surrender he would reach for a gun and go down with half a dozen bullets in him.

Two or three of the men wandered into the house and presently smoke rose from the chimney. Tim guessed they were preparing a meal. After what seemed an interminable time a man appeared in the doorway and called, "Come and get it." The others trooped into the house with the exception of one slim young fellow.

That it was now or never Tim knew. He had to take his chance with the one left on guard. From the door of the barn he peered out. The posse man on guard was Bob Watson. He was sitting on the corral fence about a rope's length from the saddled horse. His eyes were for the moment on the calves in the pasture.

Tim raced for the corral, his .45 out. Bob turned his head, startled eyes on the runner. Jolly did not fire. He wanted to delay that till he was forced to it, since the sound of the explosion would bring those inside boiling out. The kid did not lift the scatter gun from his knees. Tim thought he was petrified with fear until he spoke.

"I'm for you," he said. "Light a shuck."

Tim was never more surprised. He pulled the slip knot, vaulted into the saddle, swung the bronco around, and was off. The boy's gun roared twice, but not before the rider was fifty yards away. He had fired into the air.

Men crowded out of the doorway like seeds from a squeezed orange. They did not immediately see the galloping horse.

"What in blazes?" a man shouted.

"I missed him," Bob said.

The guns drummed, the sound of them crashing together. It was only a split second before Tim disappeared over a rise in the road. They rushed for their mounts which were in the corral, some of them unsaddled, the others with loosened cinches.

"Comes of bringing a kid along," a flat-faced heavy-set man growled as he swung to the saddle.

Tim was out of sight long before they reached the rise where they had last seen him. He had vanished into the roll of small hills which led to the range in the distance. They searched for an hour and found no trace of him.

"He's high-tailin' it to warn Sum," the chief deputy said gloomily. "Pete will sure read us the riot act."

"Not me, he won't," another differed. "It was his job to stay here himself and collect Sumner, but he's so dad-gummed gun-shy he beat it to town and left us the chore to do. Personally I don't like the setup. I get along with the Sloans all right. Let Old Anse kill his own snakes."

Since there was no use waiting at the ranch any longer they set out for town.

19

SHERIFF WALSH had taken no chance of losing his prisoners. Both of them were handcuffed and as a further precaution ropes tied to the bridles of their mounts were fastened to the horns of the deputies' saddles.

"Better gag and hogtie us," jeered Morg. "No tellin' what desperate criminals like us will do."

"Long as I'm sheriff you won't hold up any more stages or shoot down innocent men," Walsh said harshly.

As they jogged down the road Randolph put a question to the deputy beside him, a man named McHenry. "The way I heard it one of the passengers on the stage was shot. How bad was he hurt?"

The deputy looked at him angrily. "Doc Jones says he won't live till morning. You'd better pray he does."

McHenry had taken no part in the feud. Sloan did not know him very well but had always thought the man felt rather friendly to him. It was a shock to find that in his mind the deputy had already condemned him and Morg. He might represent a complete shift of opinion.

"Any evidence against us?" Sloan inquired.

"Plenty," McHenry answered sharply. "One of the road agents limped. That was Morg Vance. Yore hat was identified by the bullet holes in it. The trail of the holdups led right to yore ranch. And we just found one of the masks in yore house."

"Careless, weren't we? I wear a hat anybody can identify, then drop it and don't bother to pick it up. We get word we are suspected and leave a mask lying around the house. Looks like we're plumb fools certain."

McHenry's gaze held to the prisoner, a faint doubt stirring in his mind. He had sympathized with this wild young fellow, driven to violence by involvement in the family tragedy, but his lenience did not include toleration of robbery and murder.

"Your hat, isn't it?" he snapped.

"No. I haven't worn that hat for weeks."

"Has yore initials in the band," the deputy mentioned coldly.

Sloan's eyes narrowed in thought. Was this part of the frame-up? It would have been easy for somebody to get hold of the hat while they were all out at work. If so, Anse had got busy at last. None of Duff's crowd would have thought of that. Randy had assumed that after the stage robbery his enemies had improvised evidence to throw the guilt on him and his brother. Now he revised his opinion. The plot went deeper than that. The holdup had been deliberately arranged to implicate them. That had been its primary purpose.

"Maybe it *is* my hat," he said. "Ask Anse Cottrell who was wearing it?"

"Cut out the talk back there," the sheriff ordered, slewing around in the saddle.

"Hell, Pete, you don't own my tongue," grumbled McHenry. He was beginning to wonder whether this was another of old Cottrell's tricks. It would be like him to fix a trap for his enemies.

The lethargy of a hot afternoon rested on Round Top as they rode through the suburbs but before they reached the jail it was gone. Word of their arrival spread fast and the streets became alive with people. They poured out of stores and saloons and the courthouse. Randolph felt anger beat against him like a violent wind. Public opinion had already convicted him.

Nora came to the door of her store as the bunch of riders passed. She leaned against the jamb white-faced and frightened, then took a step or two toward the sidewalk. Randy shook his head and she stopped.

From Stump's store Duff and LePage appeared. Duff's villainous face still showed the scars of the beating he had received. He straddled to the edge of the wooden platform, to shake at Sloan his big fist and shout a jubilant threat.

"You're gonna be strung up tonight, you damned killer. That hillbilly you shot died an hour ago."

LePage made his contribution. "Looks like this will be quite a night, boys," he said, an evil grin on his thin cruel mouth.

Randy felt a cold crawling in his stomach. His enemies had him at last where they wanted him. They had stacked the cards and dealt him an unplayable hand.

The sheriff pulled up at the jail. A small crowd had gathered to see the prisoners. The riders dismounted.

"Make way there," Walsh ordered importantly.

The door of the jail closed behind the party. Randy and Morg were locked in a room on the second floor. The handcuffs were not removed.

Morg sat on a cot, a troubled frown on his homely puckered face. "We're sure enough in a tight, Randy," he said. "I plumb don't like it."

"Nor I," Sloan agreed. "We're not here just by bad luck. Anse has pulled off a slick job. He must have arranged the holdup." The young man paced the floor. "This has been his town. He was losing it. Now he has got it back. We're a pair of murdering bandits. That gives him an excuse for rubbing us out. He won't fool around sending us to the pen like he did Sum. That was a mistake he isn't going to make again."

"They'll get Sum too," the old man prophesied. "All that drugstore posse has to do is sit on their behinds till he rides in. If he shows fight they'll cut him down

"Unless Tim gets word to him in time."

"Yeah, with six men roostin' there in the yard?"

"Not much chance," Randy agreed. "But there's this. If Tim does make it to Sum they won't sit around saying how tough it is. They will get busy."

He walked to the barred window and looked out. Lifting his eyes, he could see a patch of blue sky and the sun on its way down to the range behind which it soon would set. It came to his mind sharply that this might be the last time he would ever see its rays streaming across the tips of the greasewood. He put that out of his mind. This was no time to feel sorry for himself.

His thoughts ran over the turbulent years that had brought him to this. The bloodshed had been none of his seeking. It was a pattern of life into which he had been born. The wildness in him that had ran riot for a year or two had come out of the tragedies that had befallen the family, the sense of being set apart from other youths by fate. There had been a fire in him that wanted to live before he died.

Morg joined him at the window and looked down at the excitement in the street. They could hear a piano being played in a hurdy-gurdy.

"I've had some good times in the Palace," the little man said. "There was a girl there named Belle I took quite a fancy to. She up and married a mule skinner called Starr. I disremember his first name. They moved to Globe. Last year when I was up there I bumped into her. She had took on considerable weight. Seems there's quite a constellation of little Starrs now."

"If you had married her yourself instead of raising hell you might have raised a nice crop of cherubs," Randolph suggested.

"And been a deacon in the church like Old Anse. Where do you reckon that buzzard is tonight anyhow?"

"Staying away from any rookus there may be, but with his finger right on the trigger. If this works out the way he wants he'll spend tomorrow deploring the unhappy fate we brought on ourselves."

"Once I had my Winchester lined up on him and yore pappy made me lay off. Greatest mistake we ever made — both of us."

"We never learn," Randolph replied bitterly. "I got us into this. Thought I knew better than Joe Tubbs and Andy Putnam. They were right. You can't fight wolves with soft words. We ought to have taken the war to Old Anse and put the fear into his scoundrels."

Morgan Vance shook his head. "No, Randy. You had the right of it. Cottrell is the big mogul in this district. He owns the law. If we had started our guns smokin' we would have been outlaws *pronto.*"

"What are we now?" Randolph asked.

Morg looked down at his handcuffs and grinned wryly. "We got our tails in a crack certain, but maybe somebody will open the door and let us loose."

"You ought to be cussin' me out," Randy told his old friend.

"Sho, boy, nothin' to that." Morg chewed tobacco comfortably. "We'll get a kick outa this tomorrow."

The first street lights were coming on when the prisoners saw the second detachment of the sheriff's posse coming down the street. Neither Sumner Sloan nor Tim Jolly were with them. This was either good news or bad. It might mean that the Box S men had escaped the net, or it might be that they had been shot down fighting. In front of the Empire saloon Sheriff Walsh met the posse. A question and an answer passed. The sheriff slammed his fist into the palm of the other hand. One of the deputies explained at length, but Walsh brushed aside angrily what he was saying. One of the other riders spoke up. He and the sheriff had a sharp interchange of words after which Walsh slammed back through the folding doors into the saloon.

"They didn't get our boys," Morg said excitedly. "Must of been a slip-up somewheres. That sure warms my heart."

Randy nodded. His eyes were shining. "Tim must have got away and warned Sum."

They were glad both on their friends' account and on their own. Sumner would certainly try his best to rescue them.

When the jailor, Nels Anderson, brought them dinner the sheriff accompanied him. Walsh stood in the doorway gun in hand to make sure his prisoners would make no attempt to escape. He did not release them from their handcuffs. That he was in a bad humor was apparent.

Morg condoled with him in mock sympathy. "Too bad you didn't get Sumner too. Course if anything happens to us he'll bump you off certain. That's a tough break for a guy as gun-shy as you. I don't reckon you'll do much sleeping for a while."

"Now, Morg you know better than that," Walsh protested. "I'm sheriff of this county. When a warrant is given me for a man's arrest I have to execute it. I got nothing against you boys or Sumner either."

"We might believe that if you hadn't sent that no-account Fox to find in our house a mask that wasn't there until he carried it in," Randy answered.

"Nothing to that. Take it up with Fox if he did you dirt. I aim to treat you nice long as you are here."

"How long will that be?" Randy asked the officer. "Maybe you haven't noticed there is a good deal of excitement going on in the street. Judging by the number tanking up the saloons must be pretty crowded for this time of the evening. Are you prepared to protect us from a mob if the jail is attacked?"

Walsh assured them that there was not going to be any trouble.

But after he had gone and the hours drew on the excitement outside increased. The town buzzed with activity like a swarm of hiving bees. More than once a voice from below shouted threats at them. Several times they caught sight of Duff and LePage, each of them the center of a small knot of men.

"They are doing their damndest to put ropes around our necks," Morg said.

"The riffraff is all stirred up," Randy observed. "And the good people won't lift a hand for us, seeing that we are a pair of murderous outlaws."

"We'll make it," Morgan predicted cheerfully.

He wished he was more sure that he was a true prophet.

20

AT SIGHT of Randolph Sloan, a handcuffed prisoner, a wave of fear swept over Nora Hamilton. He was once more in deep trouble, and this time without the sympathy of the town back of him. She was appalled at the vehemence of the anger beating on him. That LePage and Duff should show their exultant hatred was to be expected, but she saw good citizens joining in it.

As the afternoon wore into evening her spirits sank lower. There was a great deal of drinking. The shuffling of men's feet on the sidewalk was almost constant. A good many did not go home for supper but instead ate crackers and cheese bought at a store. They did not want to miss anything. Fragments of talk came to her. Fellows like the Sloans were better dead. They had been involved in trouble for twenty years. Now they had gone too far.

Old Matt Chunn hobbled into the shop. He was worried and showed it. "I don't like the way things are shaping, Miss Nora. Randy's enemies are awful busy stirring folks up. If I wasn't a million years old maybe I could do something."

The young woman lifted a face gray and drawn. "You don't mean —— " She let the sentence die unfinished.

"I'm skeered," he said. "Them wolves mean to get him sure."

"But Sheriff Walsh. He'll keep Randy in the jail."

"Walsh won't fight a lick. If a mob gits going it will bust the jail wide open. Somebody is payin' for free drinks. The scalawags are wilding up."

Nora felt a cold wind blow through her. It was a terrible thought that Randy might be going to lose the life that was so strong and quick in him, that the light in his gay eyes would be blotted out forever. His talk had made it clear to her how much he had loved the physical world. It might be that never again would he know the feeling of a saddle between his muscular thighs or the comfort of dropping to sleep before a campfire with the night crowding in, the stars near, and the shadowy hills reaching to the sky.

What could she do to help him, a lone woman and one without influence? Outside of Matt Chunn she had no friends in town, except perhaps Bill and Julia Cottrell. Bill had been nice to her and had dropped into the store to see her two or three times, but he had gone to Chrysolite as manager of his father's ore-freighting business. Maybe Julia could get old Anse to intervene. Somebody ought to ride out to the Box S and tell Sumner Sloan of his brother's danger.

After Matt had gone Nora could no longer sit alone with her fears. She flung a cloak over her white dress, put out the lamp, and walked out into the packed street. At night Round Top was a man's town and this evening more so than usual. No other woman was to be seen. As she hurried down the sidewalk she was aware of curious glances turned her way, but nobody spoke to her until Dan Duff bumped into her as he came out of the Empire saloon.

"If you're lookin' for yore fancy man, he's got another engagement tonight," he jeered.

Nora knew he had been drinking heavily. He teetered on his feet and his big body swayed. She tried to pass him but he deliberately blocked the way.

"What's yore hurry? You'll be needing another man now."

A flat hard voice said, "You will apologize to Miss Hamilton at once."

A man had stepped from the road to the sidewalk. He was small and slender, but his narrowed eyes rested on Duff and seemed to freeze him. The jubilation went out of the fellow's face as the light from a blown candle.

"Now Cully, all I said was —— "

Ducret cut his explanation short. "I heard what you said. Say yore piece. Tell her you are a liar and a bully and you're swallowing the insult."

Filled with liquor though he was, Duff's throat went dry. The small Texan had not raised his voice. His hand had not moved toward a weapon. But the big ruffian knew how incredibly swift was his draw. Several men were watching the scene from a little distance. Duff's glance moved over them and found no help there, though LePage was one of them. He had to work this out alone — to fight or to humiliate himself. He gulped down a lump in his throat.

"I was jest funnin', Cully. Didn't mean a thing. Honest, I —— "

Again Ducret interrupted. "Talk to Miss Hamilton and not to me — and make it good."

Duff's words stumbled one over another. "I don't aim ever to annoy a lady, Miss Hamilton. Like I said, I was foolin'. I'm sure sorry. Fact is, I been drinkin', and I ain't quite responsible. Maybe I wasn't exactly polite."

"Keep right on. You're not thorough enough." In Ducret's low voice was an icy coldness. The drunken man felt the threat as clearly as if it had been enforced by a .45.

Duff's next words came reluctantly. "It was whisky talk, Miss, but I reckon it sounded like I was a — a kinda bully and — a liar."

"Get out," Ducret ordered.

The big man shuffled across the sidewalk into the saloon.

"I don't know where you are going, Miss Hamilton," Ducret said. "But there are a lot of roughs out tonight. I'll walk with you."

"I'm sorry," Nora told him, as they moved down the sidewalk. "You've made an enemy of him."

The Texan dismissed Duff from consideration. "We won't worry about that."

"It was very kind of you to help me. I'll always remember."

He waved her thanks aside. "Where I come from men aren't allowed to insult good women."

The adjective surprised her. She glanced quickly at him and decided to let her unhappiness break into words. "Are they going to — to kill him?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Looks like it. They wouldn't if the sheriff was worth the powder to blow him up."

"Won't somebody stop them?" She thought of how he had cowed Duff. "You could do it. I'm sure you could."

Hard-eyed, he looked at her. They had turned into the walk leading to the Cottrell house. "Why should I? He brought this on himself. And it's not the first time."

"But he is not guilty."

"How do you know he isn't?"

She had no evidence to offer that he gave any weight. He told her bluntly that even if he thought the prisoners innocent he would not lift a hand for them. The Sloans were no friends of his.

He left her on the porch.

Julia was at the piano when Nora knocked. The music stopped and she came to the door. After a look at Nora's face she cried, "What's the matter?"

"They are going to kill Randy Sloan. They are getting ready to break into jail."

Julia was startled. "I didn't know he was in jail. I came back from riding an hour ago. Are you sure?"

"I saw them bring him in. Everybody in town knows they are going to — to lynch him."

From Nora's stricken face Julia gathered fear, though she still protested that it could not be true. She led the way into her father's office. He was reading a newspaper but looked up from it to listen to his daughter's excited questions.

He said blandly, "I think Miss Hamilton is unduly disturbed." There were always hotheads, he explained, to start wild talk that came to nothing. Naturally the town was incensed at the wanton murder of the stagecoach passenger, but the sheriff had the prisoners locked up and would permit no violence. In due time the law would punish the murderers.

Nora protested that the arrested men were not guilty but would be taken out and hanged before the night was over unless somebody stopped the crime.

"You could save them, Father," Julia said.

He laced his fingers and leaned back in the chair. "My dear, this is nonsense. These men are under the custody of our good sheriff. He will enforce law and order. There is not the least need for me to interfere." To Nora he spoke in gentle reproof. "I warned you to forget this young man. Knowing him as you did not, I begged you to have nothing to do with him. Again I urge you to put him out of your mind. He has gone bad. Remember the Scriptural injunction, 'He that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword.' I have seen many like him. They go from bad to worse — live violently and come to a sudden and terrible end."

Looking down at her father, Julia realized fully for the first time what manner of man he was. A scunner of him surged up in her. He was a quicksand of deceit. She felt sure he knew what was planned for tonight. *He wanted Randy Sloan killed.*

She said, a lash of contempt in her voice, "You will do nothing to save these men?"

"I will not make myself ridiculous by insulting Pete Walsh," he answered.

Julia said to the other girl, "Come," and walked out of the room.

"If we could get word to Sumner Sloan in time," Nora cried as soon as they were alone.

"We'll talk with Brad Webber," Julia decided. It was possible that Nora's fear was exaggerating the danger. The banker would know what was best to do.

They found him at home in his shirtsleeves and slippers reading *Kenilworth.* When the bank closed he had come straight home and did not even know that the Box S men had been arrested. Julia saw that Nora's news disturbed him greatly. He reached for his boots and put them on.

"What are you going to do?" his wife asked.

"I'm going to find out if there aren't enough men with guts in town to stop this outrage," he told her.

"I spoke to Father," Julia said. "He won't lift a hand. He says it is absurd that men will try to storm the jail."

Webber gave her a strange look. He wondered if Anse Cottrell was not at the bottom of the disturbance. If so, the ruffians would stop at nothing. The banker knew it would not be easy to gather a group to fight actively against a lynching. The town was angry at the killing of the Kentuckian and felt that the two prisoners were guilty.

A knock sounded on the door. Mrs. Webber opened it, to let in the Methodist minister. He had just come from up town and was much alarmed. All the talk was of breaking into the jail. He had spoken to several of his congregation and they had refused to interfere.

"We ought to get word to Sumner Sloan," Nora urged.

"That might mean more bloodshed," the minister demurred.

Julia drew Webber aside and talked with him. He shook his head, listened, protested, and at last consented to her urgent argument.

"We're going to the Box S," Julia told Nora. "Mr. Webber is going to try to hold off the jail attack until the Sloan's get here."

She led the way to the stable back of the Cottrell house. Julia's riding horse was kept at a livery stable but the one Anse used for his buggy stayed here. Without lighting a lantern Julia harnessed the animal and put it between the buggy shafts. Quietly as possible she drove out of the yard, taking a back street to get out of town unnoticed. They could hear the shouts of excited men on the main street a block away. Neither of them voiced their fear that even if they could get help it would be too late.

A man hailed them. "Hi, Jule, this is no time for you to be out on the street." He stepped into the road from the sidewalk and put a foot on a hub of a wheel.

Julia had stopped reluctantly. She did not want to arouse suspicion. "Why not?" She demanded.

"There's trouble afoot. Better go home."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Never mind. Do as I say."

"Why should I, Jim McHenry."

Nora interrupted in a low voice. "He's one of the men who brought Randy to town."

"So you are one of Dan Duff's killer crew," Julia flung at him, her voice like a whip.

He denied it swiftly. He was against this lynching, but there was not a thing he could do about it. The town had gone crazy.

Julia told him what he could do — report to Brad Webber and help arouse good citizens. He explained that the trouble was nobody cared to make a fight to save a pair of bandits who had just shot down an innocent stranger.

"They did not rob the stage," Nora broke out. "They had nothing to do with it. Can't you see it's a plot of their enemies?"

McHenry looked at her, surprised at her vehemence. "You may be right," he replied.

"Then do something about it," Julia told him stormily. "Get your gun and go see Brad Webber."

She flicked the horse with the light lash and the animal started.

McHenry watched them go, wondering what Julia was up to.

Presently the lights of the town lay behind the girls. The horse was a stepper and Julia held him to a fast clip. The first miles were over a gun-barrel road that dipped and rose here and there but not enough to prevent rapid travel. When they reached the hill country later they would have to go more slowly.

Though both of them were sick with anxiety they drove long stretches in silence. Julia broke one of these to say, "They will probably wait long enough to get a lot of fools drunk before they attack."

At the summit of the first long climb Julia pulled up the horse. "Somebody is coming," she said. "Listen."

They could hear the clip-clop of horses' hoofs approaching at a trot. Out of the darkness came a dozen riders. They stopped, gathering around the buggy.

Julia recognized several of them. "Is Sumner Sloan here?" she asked.

Sumner identified himself. He nodded to Nora but spoke to Julia. "You're the Cottrell girl, aren't you?"

"Your brother is in a bad jam," Julia said sharply. "The town has gone crazy. They are going to storm the jail and hang him."

The shock of her words swept through the group.

"Are you sure?" Sumner asked.

"I'm sure they are going to try. Brad Webber is going to raise a group to hold them back until you get there if he can."

Tubbs cut in with a rasping incredulous laugh. "So Old Anse sent his daughter to tell us," he yelped.

Crawford Sloan rebuked him curtly. "We'll hear no more of that, Joe. We're already under obligations to Miss Cottrell." To Julia he said. "Any idea how many of them?"

"A lot of men are getting drunk." Nora cried. "That man Duff boasted to me they would get Randy tonight."

"Any time set?"

"I don't know, but hurry — hurry."

Sumner put his horse to a gallop and pounded down the slope. The others followed. The girls heard the thudding of the hoofs thin down to a murmur and die away.

Julia turned the buggy and headed back for town.

21

THROUGH the barred window of their prison Randolph Sloan looked down on a town seething with unrest. The lights had been on for hours and Jeff Davis Street was alive with shifting figures. Men poured in and out of the saloons constantly. From more than one small group had come the savage triumphant yell of man hunters primed for the kill.

Morgan Vance joined him at the window. "Won't be long now," he said. "Get a guy drunk and he's filled with Dutch courage. With a hundred others beside him he ain't scared to kill a couple of unarmed men." He had once helped to hang two rustlers and the memory of it was not pleasant.

Randy did not answer immediately. He was watching a small group of men moving down the opposite side of the street. Brad Webber was one of them. The others were old Matt Chunn, Jim McHenry, the stage driver Hank Main, his shotgun messenger Nate Cleland, and young Bob Watson.

"Jumpin' Jupiter!" Morg exclaimed. "What's tyin' that bunch together?"

It did seem an incongruous group. Webber and Chunn were friends of the Sloans, McHenry and Watson had been two of the deputies arresting them, and the stagecoach team had made it understood that they were neutrals in the feud. But a faint hope stirred in Randy. Brad and Matt would not be with the others if they were unfriendly to him. He wondered if they were armed. If they had come only to argue with Duff and his crowd it would do no good.

Presently the owner of the corral, Monty Norris, joined them.

Morgan damped his companion's hopes. "That puny bunch can't stand up to a mob hell-bent on stringing us up. They know that doggoned well and they won't try."

A shift in the group showed that Nate Cleland had a saddle gun with him. Webber crossed the road followed by the others and knocked on the door of the jail. A deputy sheriff answered from a window with a question.

"What you want?"

"We want to talk with the sheriff. " Webber replied.

"He's outa town. Went up to Three Pines to arrest a horse thief. I'm in charge."

"There is going to be trouble," the banker said. "Let us in and we'll help you hold the jail in case of an attack."

"I'm not lettin' anybody in," the deputy said doggedly.

"How do I know you're figuring on helping me? I'm playing this safe."

Webber talked in vain. He knew very well that Malvern meant to give up the prisoners without a fight. Pete Walsh had left town to escape criticism for not defending those he had arrested.

Duff and LePage came down the street with two other men. All of them had drunk too much liquor.

"Just dropped around to make sure you got yore prisoners safe, Malvern," he shouted to the jailor.

The banker said, "Duff, this is murder."

"Sure. They had no call to kill that poor guy on the stage."

"You know what I mean," Webber said sternly. "These boys inside may not be guilty. Give them a chance to prove it."

"What kinda chance did they give that hillbilly? No, sir. We're gonna let 'em kick at the end of ropes." Duff caught sight of Cleland's saddle gun. "Time to have used that scatter gun was when these outlaws attacked the stage, Nate. Any fellow who tries to interfere with justice tonight will get his."

Duff did not wait for an answer but swaggered away.

The banker posted his men back of the adobe wall of a wagon yard across the street from the jail. "I'll be back," he promised. "I don't think anything will start in the next few minutes. I'm going to see Anse Cottrell. If anybody can stop this he is the man."

Cottrell did not want to talk with Webber, but he greeted him with a pretense of heartiness, laying down the newspaper he had hurriedly picked up. "Well, well, Brad. Nice to see you. I just been reading that Hal Spence aims to run for county commissioner. He's a good man. We'd ought to get back of him and elect him."

Webber ignored the lead. "Anse, we've got to stop this damnable crime Duff and his ruffians are getting ready to commit. It will disgrace our town forever."

"Has Dan been up to some more of his deviltry?" Cottrell asked blandly.

"He means to lynch Randy Sloan and Morg Vance. I know Randy belongs to a faction opposed to you, but I am sure you wouldn't want this to happen. They may be innocent. I think they are."

"All this is news to me," Cottrell protested. "But you know Dan. Always shooting off his mouth. Doesn't mean a thing. Pete Walsh has Sloan and Vance safely locked up."

"The drunken fools mean to break into the jail. Walsh isn't here. He left town to pick up some rustler. He did not want to be here tonight."

"Now Brad that doesn't sound reasonable. You're taking this too seriously."

"Anse, these men are going to be hanged inside of half an hour unless somebody stops them. You are the only man that can do it."

"I'm just a private citizen like you are. There isn't a thing I can do. I've broken with Duff. As for these men, apart from the fact that one of them is a Sloan, they are outlaws and killers. This district will be better off without them. I would prefer a lawful execution but will not risk bloodshed by interfering. They have brought this on themselves."

They heard the trampling of feet on the porch. Four men broke into the room, all of them armed. Cottrell heaved his big body from the chair, his eyes slitted and hard. "What does this mean?" he demanded.

Crawford Sloan answered him bluntly, cold anger in his harsh voice. 'It means that if your gunmen kill Randy tonight you die too."

Joe Tubbs had a rope in his hands. He flung the loop over Cottrell's head and tightened it. The eyes of Anse swept around to take in the other two men. He knew them both. One was Jed Larsen, a gaunt fellow with sunken cheeks and bitter eyes. Cottrell had brought about the death of his brother a few years earlier. He was the husband of Mary Sloan. The fourth man was Andy Putnam. Anse had once stood by and seen one of his cowboys flog the little fellow with a whip. Any one of these men would be willing to satisfy his hatred against the enemy who had injured them all.

"You in this too, Brad?" Cottrell asked.

Crawford answered for him. "No, but since he is here he will have to stay. We will keep this a private party without interruption. I'll explain the situation. A dozen of us are in town, all well armed. There isn't going to be any lynching. We're taking Randy and Morg home with us. You're going downtown, this rope around your throat, to tell your killers to lay off."

Anse looked him in the eye. "If I do, what guarantee do I have that you won't kill me afterward?"

"No guarantee except my word," Crawford told him. "We're calling the turn, not you."

"You wouldn't dare hang me."

Tubbs laughed maliciously. "I'm yearning for the chance," he gibed. "Stick it out, you old wart, so I can show you." He added, on a savage impulse, "Let's do it now. We'll never find a better time."

"Don't push on the reins, Joe," Crawford said. "It may come to that, but not yet. We didn't come here to hang a man but to save our two boys from it. Make your mind up quick, Anse. There is a howling mob uptown ready to barge into trouble. A half a dozen men may be dead inside of ten minutes if we don't hurry."

"Not Randy or Morg either, but a bunch of yore plug-uglies who have needed killing for a hell of a long time," Putnam chipped in venemously.

"I'll go," Cottrell decided. "I'm a law-abiding citizen and if I can help prevent a riot it is my duty."

"Besides being a lot more comfortable than hanging from a tree limb and kicking yore heels in the air," Tubbs jeered. "Don't feed us talk about yore duty, you old hypocrite. We know you."

"Before I move a step I want this rope taken from my neck," Cottrell said firmly.

Crawford Sloan removed the rope. It would be less provocative if their prisoner seemed to be urging peace with no pressure on him.

As they moved up the street toward the jail the howl of a hundred voices came to them. It was the wolf-cry of the mob eager for the kill. Crawford set the pace faster. There was not much time left.

Duff's raucous shout racketed down between the buildings. "Two bad men going to hell on a shutter."

In the momentary silence that followed a thin high treble flung back a shrill defiance. "One of 'em is gonna be Dan Duff," it announced.

Old Matt Chunn was standing in the gateway of the wagon yard, a .45 in his hand. Somebody back of the wall jumped out and dragged Matt back to safety. It was Nate Cleland. A bullet struck the iron hinge of the gate and glanced off in ricochet. While Duff's gun was still smoking a rifle cracked from the flat roof of a cobbler's shop. Duff's big body swayed and went down in a huddled mass on the dusty road.

Sumner Sloan came to the edge of the roof, his long gaunt figure throwing a distorted shadow in the moonlight. "You crazy fools, a dozen rifles are covering you. Keep coming, and you'll be slaughtered."

Anse Cottrell lumbered forward. "Put up your guns and go home," he ordered. "The law will take care of these killers. Do as I tell you, unless you want a lot of widows in this town before morning."

Brad Webber gave the old man good for nerve. He stood out in the open with the weapons of his enemies trained on him, men filled with a bitter and passionate hatred of him, and poured out a tirade of abuse on them, knowing that a crook of the finger might send a slug crashing into his belly.

Sumner Sloan glared down at Anse, his long frame tight and rigid. A hot and savage anger burned in him. Old memories poured turbulently through his mind — of the ruin this man had brought on his family and his friends, of outrages without number culminating in the deaths of his father and uncle, in his own long imprisonment. There had been a time when he would not have hesitated an instant to pay that debt, but the years had brought him patience. There would come an hour of settlement but this was not it. Too many of his friends were involved tonight and would be put in the wrong.

He cut Anse short harshly. "Enough of that. Give orders to your jailor to turn Randy and Morg over to us."

The would-be lynchers had given up any thought of storming the jail. Most of them had been dragged along halfheartedly and even the others realized that a change in the situation had put them at a helpless disadvantage. From behind walls, from the roofs of buildings, from the open street they could see the projecting barrels of the rifles. The bully who had led them lay groaning in the road. They were in a hurry to get away before a general engagement started. At first a few of those in the rear slipped into saloons and entry ways, but presently the pressure to escape caused almost a stampede.

Sourly Cottrell looked up at the window from which the anxious face of the jailor looked down. "Malvern, you see how it is," he rasped. "These scoundrels will tear the jail down to get the murderers they want to release. I advise you to give up your prisoners. The sheriff will arrest them later."

A man walked out of a doorway and joined Cottrell. He moved lazily and gracefully as a cat, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. Though he did not say a word, all those watching him knew Ducret had served notice he was ready to go into action if Cottrell was attacked.

"The trouble is over for tonight, Cully," Anse said hurriedly. He did not want his enemies to interpret Ducret's appearance as a challenge. If guns began to smoke both of them would be riddled with bullets.

The door of the jail opened and out of it came Randy Sloan and Morg Vance. In spite of his limp the old cowpuncher moved jauntily, his hat tiptilted at a rakish angle as usual.

"Never was so glad in my life to get out of a calaboose," he said. His glance picked up Duff lying in the dust whimpering. "Too bad the boys spoiled yore nice picnic, Dan. You don't have any luck, do you?"

Brad Webber stepped forward. "Somebody had better get Doctor Jones. It would be a good idea for the rest of us to go home. We ought to be grateful for one thing. This town has just missed having the most tragic night in its history. It ought to be a lesson to all of us."

"We'll rock along, boys," Sumner said. "Show's over. These windjammers of Cottrell are gun-shy when there is a showdown."

The Sloan group moved in a compact body to their mounts. They could be heard laughing and talking jubilantly. Presently the beat of their horses' feet sounded as they cantered out of town.

Even the wiser ones among them shared the gladness. They had rescued their friends without a costly battle. If Duff was mortally wounded he had only himself to blame. It lifted the spirits of all of them to feel that the Sloan faction was again a power in the district. Yet the leaders realized that the battle lines were drawn and grim war lay ahead of them.

22

IN SPITE OF his colorless face and formal dress there was nothing soft about Miles Hancock. He had fought his way up from the ranks to the top by sheer toughness of fiber. The man was thorough. It was his custom to get the fullest possible information about important matters before making up his mind. There were conflicting claims about the best route to Chrysolite and he had come west to weigh the value of each before making a final decision. He did not accept unquestioned even what John Bancroft told him, for he knew his nephew had personal reasons for siding with Cottrell. The many men with whom he talked were surprised how well informed he was about the district. He had pored over contour maps, estimated grades, and probable costs compiled by his engineers, and was now looking over the actual terrain himself.

Since the logic of the situation brought his mind back often to Bigg's Bend he drove out with Bancroft to inspect it. They drew up on the bluff above the Box S ranch and looked down into the valley. From this height the desert looked level as a floor. The ranch buildings nestled close to the river which came out of the hills like a silver thread to disappear presently into lower folds of land. Except for the irrigated patches of green on the Sloan spread the country was parched to a dull brown. Many days of blistering heat like this had baked the desert.

Two riders came out of a ravine headed down a slope which led to a draw. At sight of the buggy they pulled up, then turned and came across the gravelly prong toward it.

"Be careful what you say," Bancroft warned. "One of them is young Sloan."

"Good," his uncle said. "I want to meet him."

A glimmer of mirth lit Bancroft's face. "Again?" he asked.

Randy Sloan nodded a casual greeting at the mine manager. He had heard through the grapevine that Miles Hancock had arrived and guessed that this stranger wearing sidewhiskers and dressed in broadcloth was he. The man had a keen steady awareness. His clean-shaven upper lip gave him a stern appearance.

Bancroft introduced them, adding maliciously, "I think you have met before."

"I haven't had the pleasure," Randy answered quietly.

"My mistake," Bancroft murmured.

His uncle looked the cattleman over with cool disapproving eyes. "So this is what an outlaw looks like," he said. "I am surprised."

"You are also misinformed," Randy told him. "I am not an outlaw."

"As I understand, you were arrested for robbing the Blue Creek stage and your friends broke you out of jail."

"Correct," Randy admitted. "My friends arrived just in time to keep me and Morg from being lynched."

The little man beside Sloan nodded. "That's right. I'm Morg Vance. We were framed from where the chunk lay. Anse Cottrell's fine work."

Hancock's skeptical gaze rested on the cowpuncher. "Interesting if true. Mr. Cottrell is the guilty party and not you. I don't suppose you expect me to believe that, Mr. Sloan, with the evidence all pointing to you, but of course you have to offer some story. Do innocent men, even in this country, ride in pairs, armed with both rifles and revolvers?"

"Only when they are afraid of being shot from ambush," Randy replied. "If you are going to understand this situation, Mr. Hancock, you will have to go away back before the stage holdup to discover the truth. It's a long tragic story."

The railroad man was less sure than he had been. Cottrell was a respectable prosperous citizen and this man was an outlaw and a killer, but Sloan had an open candid face and Cottrell a shifty eye that invited distrust. It would do no harm to hear the young fellow's side of this.

"I'll listen," Hancock said curtly.

The broiling sun beat down on them torridly making of the earth a caldron of shimmering heat. The New Yorker's collar had wilted. Perspiration streamed down his face and neck. In his tight city clothes he must, Randy thought, be suffering a good deal.

"We had better get out of the sun," Sloan said. "I have an idea, Mr. Hancock. You want to drive down anyhow and see the layout at the ranch. It's about dinnertime. We have shade there and cool spring water. After dinner you can relax through the heat of the day and ride back to town when the sun has gone down." A smile, gay and impish, lit the young man's face. "It will make a good story to tell later that you ate with a bunch of outlaws in their hide-out."

If there was a touch of impudence in the suggestion Hancock did not resent it. He had told Sloan bluntly that he was a criminal and the ranchman had taken it well, with dignity and without blustering. The New Yorker was beginning to feel sick from the terrific heat. The story could wait. After all why not accept an offer of hospitality made with such gracious effrontery? If he was going to listen to the fellow's defense it would be more pleasant to do it in comfort.

The straight lips of the financier softened to a smile. "What are we waiting for?" he asked. "I would go with Jesse James to get out of this heat — and thank him."

Sitting on the shaded porch at the Box S ranch, a cool drink in his hand, Hancock drew from Randy Sloan the reasons why he felt that the railroad should run past Bigg's Bend and make of this ranch land a division point. Though the New Yorker did not say so, he admitted to himself the cogency of the young man's arguments. The decisive factor was the abundance of water, enough to supply both the railroad and the town that would grow up here. Moreover, the cost of building would be less, since by this route the heavy mountain grades would be missed.

Before Morg had dinner ready Sumner and Tim rode in from fixing a fence of the south pasture. Randy introduced them to the guest. The tall gaunt man with the bitter eyes, Hancock guessed, must be the brother lately released from the penitentiary. He was self-contained and coldly reserved, but there was something in him that inspired respect.

The house showed the careless slackness of bachelors' headquarters, but it was scrupulously clean. A shelf of good books attracted Hancock's attention. He noticed several titles of Dickens, Thackeray, and Scott, and to his surprise a volume of Burns' poems. The furniture was old and well worn. Two pegs driven into the wall supported a Winchester rifle and from others beside it hung a sheathed hunting knife and a holstered .44. On either side of the fireplace were portraits, one of a man and the other apparently his wife. They were dressed in a fashion of fifty years earlier and were evidently gentlefolk. The likeness of the husband to the Sloan brothers was striking.

It was not until they were sitting on the porch after dinner that the Sloans told the story of the feud and its consequences. Randy did most of the talking but Sumner interrupted occasionally to stress or make clear a point. Twice Hancock snapped out a question. Bancroft said nothing, but a cynical smile came and went on his handsome face. Below them on the porch steps Morgan Vance sat chewing tobacco silently.

Cottonwoods lined the river and shaded the ranch steading, but the desert beyond stretched to the serrated peaks rising to the sky line. The plain was aquiver with light and heat, its vegetation heavy with dust. As the sun sank lower on the horizon its rays streamed across the green leaves of the prickly pear and the thorny prongs of the cholla. The desert floor between them was cracked into dry squares baked hard as bricks.

Hancock had never seen a more inhospitable land. Everything that lived there, vegetable and animal, was conditioned by it, fought against odds desperately for existence. It had helped to mold these hard brown men who were so strongly individual, so daring and so turbulent. The thought flitted through the New Yorker's mind that one could not judge them by the standards of the tame and orderly East. Life had hammered them into what they were. After meeting them it was hard to believe that they were evil or vicious. They gave him a feeling of integrity, of men who would hold to a decent code.

Morgan spoke up, the cud of tobacco standing out on his leathery cheek. "These boys haven't told you half of it, Mr. Hancock. I been ridin' for the Sloans twenty years and I'll follow their dust anywhere. They are straight-up he-men, the best in the herd. Anse Cottrell has set himself up to be a tin god runnin' this whole country. He talks slick, but he's nothin' but a whited sepultery, so p'isonous that if a rattler bit him it would die. Don't take my word for it. I'm just a one-gallus brushpopper. Get any old-timer to tell you, one that isn't scared to give you the low-down." There was no stopping Morg once he had started. He poured out story after story of Cottrell's iniquity.

Randy cut him off finally with a dry comment. "You'll gather that Morg doesn't like Mr. Cottrell."

"A slightly prejudiced witness," Bancroft said.

His uncle reserved judgment. He had heard rumors before about Anse Cottrell.

23

THE SLOANS did not have to wait long to find out when and how the Cottrells would move against him. Crawford's barn was burned one night. Two days later four of Pitkin's cattle were found dead in an arroyo with bullet holes in their heads. Within twenty- four hours after this, somebody in the brush took a long shot at Sumner and missed. The bullet tore away part of the saddle horn.

Early in the following week Hugh Pressman rode in to the Box S at a gallop. He flung himself from the horse and took the porch steps three at a time. The men were eating supper. When they looked at the boy's face they knew he had brought bad news.

"Joe Tubbs has been killed," he cried.

The horse of Tubbs had come home without him, a stain of blood on the saddle. A search party had found his body lying on the road three miles from his ranch. He was still clutching a Winchester he had evidently fired twice. The killer had secreted himself back of a mesquite near the road. Four cigarette butts were found there where he had been waiting.

"Better for Joe if he had pulled the rope tight and strangled Old Anse when he had the chance," Vance said bitterly. "Might have known the vindictive old devil would get him."

In guessing who had pulled the trigger from back of the mesquite the name of Dan Duff had to be omitted. He was lying at the home of the widow Jelks still a very sick man. There was no hospital in the town and she was considered an excellent nurse. Reluctantly Anse Cottrell had agreed to guarantee payment in the event that the wounded man died or defaulted. He had a mortgage on her home and she could deduct the price from the interest.

To Anse Mrs. Jelks came with a story very disturbing to him. In Duff's delirious hours he had talked a lot. Much of what he said was disconnected snatches out of his past. Two or three times he had referred to the stage holdup as if he had a part in it. Once he had cried out, "I didn't mean to kill him."

"Did he name anybody else?" Cottrell asked.

When she told him that Duff had not Anse advised her to say nothing of this. The talk of delirious men really meant nothing.

"Dan is afraid he is going to die," the widow said. "Twice he has asked me to get the preacher. Seems like he's got something to confess. Then when he feels a little better he tells me to wait a while. Maybe his mind would be more at rest if I brought the preacher anyhow."

Cottrell advised her strongly not to do so. It would frighten Dan, making him feel that she was expecting him to die. The best thing to do was to keep him cheerful.

When she had gone he paced the office floor anxiously. In his present condition Duff was an imminent danger to him. He must not be allowed to talk — and there was only one way to prevent him. Whom could he use to do the job? LePage had taken care of Joe Tubbs, but he was not to be trusted for this. He was too thick with Dan. Ducret came to mind, but the Texan had queer kinks in his make-up, a kind of twisted loyalty. He would not kill except in a quarrel a man on the same side as himself, and in any case he probably would not shoot anybody from ambush. Other names drifted through his mind, only to be rejected.

He must do it himself. This decision he reached with a wry resentment. He hated to become involved personally in killings, but this time he could not stand back and let someone else take what risk there was. It seemed safe enough if he was careful. The widow's house was set apart from others in a dark part of town. There ought to be no danger of discovery, but there was always an off chance of being seen in the vicinity. It had to be done. Of late things had been breaking badly for him. If Duff weakened and confessed it would ruin him. He had no compunctions. Dan was living on borrowed time anyhow. He was a danger to others as well as to Anse.

The need of having to take this step angered him. It was sheer bad luck that Sumner Sloan's shot had not killed the man outright instead of leaving him a menace that for the moment deflected Cottrell's plotting from the foes he so bitterly hated. Anse was a man of inordinate greed and ambition. But for the Sloans —

first the father and now the sons — he could have swept all opposition from his path. The chemistry of an animosity that never ceased from smoldering in him rode his mind to the exclusion of all pleasure. He had to ruin utterly the strong stiff men who had come back from defeat to face him with scornful contempt. Now he had to waste energy in getting rid of the blundering fool who had turned soft. The only gleam of hope in this defensive step was that he might make it part of the attack by putting the blame of it on the Sloans.

The few hours Anse had to wait until it became dark stretched for him into an endless delay. While in a depressed mood the wounded man might send for the Methodist pastor and make a confession. He decided to pay Duff a visit. In any case it would look well for him to go and cheer up the fellow.

He found that Duff had another visitor, Homer Bascom, a wiry little man of no importance who was aware of it himself, if one could judge from a homely face that always seemed to be offering an apology for being alive. A homesteader on a mountain creek, Bascom ran a few scrub cattle, adding to his herd an occasional calf belonging to another outfit.

The nester immediately rose to go. Cottrell was contemptuously amiable to him. Though he did not amount to a shuck from the standpoint of Anse, he was a friend of LePage and more or less in his confidence.

Like many big hearty men who have never known illness, Duff was frightened and resentful. Afraid he was going to die, he blamed Cottrell.

Anse laughed at his fears. Only a few hours ago

Doctor Jones had told him Dan was doing fine. In a few days he would be up as fit as ever. The old man confided to him he had great plans for Dan. The Tubbs ranch was a well-watered spread but heavily mortgaged. Anse intended to foreclose on it and turn it over to Dan, making the payments so easy that he would hardly feel them. His motive, Cottrell mentioned to allay suspicion, was entirely selfish. He wanted to surround himself with friendly neighbors who would be co-operative.

The doctor had cut his patient off from liquor, but Anse had brought with him a stiff jolt that put Dan in a more optimistic mood. He began to brag and bluster. He would show Sumner Sloan where he got off at. That whiskey hit the right spot, no matter what Doc Jones thought. But why bring him only one drink? If he had a bottle he could keep it hidden in the bed.

Cottrell played doubtful, but under persuasion promised to bring him a pint after darkness had fallen.

Mrs. Jelks was pleased to find the sick man brighter and in a better humor. Cottrell complimented her on her nursing and slipped her a five-dollar bill to buy any little luxury Dan might desire.

The visit had done Anse as much good as it had Duff. He could see there was now no danger of an immediate confession. Also, he felt a strange satisfaction at having comforted the man and made his last hours happier. He rationalized that Duff would be better dead. The fellow would have fewer sins to account for in the next world if he died now.

Darkness was falling over the town as Cottrell walked home. The time of action was important. It had better be after Mrs. Jelks had given her patient supper and fixed him up for the night and before he had fallen asleep. The colored woman who did the Cottrell cooking would have finished the supper dishes and gone home and Julia was to attend a church social. There would be nobody in the house to miss him. After he had done what must be done he would appear at the church and take a pleasant interest in the proceedings.

He wore a dark broadcloth suit, the one he kept for Sunday best, and beneath the long Prince Albert coat he secreted a sawed-off gun loaded with buckshot. Though the road was in the outskirts of the town and not much frequented at night, he did not take it but crossed a deserted yard strewn with dog fennels and a few jonquils that still persisted in blooming. By way of her cow pasture he came to Mrs. Jelks' back yard. There was a light in her end of the house but none in the room occupied by Duff. Noiselessly he circled the building and came to an open window. He waited to listen for any sound either outside or in the house. Somewhere in the distance a dog howled. Frogs croaked in a pond not far away. A shot racketed down Texas Street, probably fired by a cowboy on a bender. From the room of the wounded man no stir came. He had been bedded down for the night. Whether he was or was not asleep yet Cottrell could not tell. His eyes searched the darkness to make sure nobody was moving up or down the road.

His first try at getting the attention of Duff was a whispered croak that did not reach across the room. He swallowed, to clear his dry throat. His voice must not be loud enough for Mrs. Jelks to hear it.

"Dan, are you awake?" he quavered.

"Who is it? What you want?" Duff asked.

"It's Anse. Keep your voice low. I got a bottle here for you, but Mrs. Jelks mustn't know. Can you light the lamp?"

"Sure, but you don't need a light to come in the window."

"I don't want to knock anything over. We'll blow it out soon as I've got the whiskey to you."

Duff fumbled for the matches, found them, struck a light, and put it to the wick. The lopsided flame guttered up. Before he had replaced the lamp chimney the crash of the gun sounded. His body fell forward, life stricken out of it by a dozen buckshot.

Anse scuttled away, again hiding the weapon beneath the long coat. His glance swept up and down the road before he crossed it. He did not look back or he would have seen a woman standing at the corner of the house, so petrified by fear that she could neither move nor cry out. She was returning from the house of a neighbor where she had been to borrow four eggs for breakfast next morning, three of them for Duff.

Anse reached home safely and cleaned the gun in the dark. After washing his hands he slipped out of the house and started for the church. On the way he dropped the empty shell in an irrigating ditch. At the social he was a model of elderly amiability, to the surprise of the young people joining in a game of Skip-to-my-Lou. His good spirits were not wholly assumed. He had escaped a pressing danger and could now give his entire attention to the Sloans.

24

THE CRASH of the gun, not a dozen yards from her, brought Anita Jelks to a standstill back of the rose bushes. Fear choking her throat, she saw Anse Cottrell come around the corner of the house. He was slipping a sawed-off shotgun under his long coat. His hurried glance stabbed in her direction and the wolfishness stamped on his face filled her with terror. She thought he must see her, but the dense foliage protected her and he shuffled away fast, his heavy graceless figure merging into the darkness.

In the house Mrs. Jelks found Duff's lifeless body sprawled half on the bed, the head and arms resting on the floor. She dropped the eggs and ran screaming to the nearest neighbor.

Brad Webber was one of the first to arrive. He and his wife had been on the way to the church social. What he saw disturbed him greatly, for he feared some one of the Sloan faction had done this in reprisal for the murder of Tubbs. Later he revised his opinion without entirely reversing it. One bit of evidence pointed in another direction. Mrs. Jelks had put out the light and left for the night. It was evident that Duff himself had relit the lamp since the burnt match was still in one hand and broken bits of the glass chimney crushed in the other fist. There were no powder burns and the buckshot that had torn into the wall plaster indicated that the gun had been fired from the window. Duff must have lit the lamp after somebody had called to him. He would not have done so unless the voice had been that of somebody he did not fear.

Mrs. Jelks was still almost hysterical with shock. In imagination she saw again that dreadful feral face of the murderer. If he learned that she had seen him he would kill her too. For years she had heard the stories of his evil deeds, not quite believing them. But she knew now that some of them were true. He was too powerful for her to accuse. The story she told in broken sentences left him out entirely.

Sheriff Walsh brushed aside the banker's deduction. The Sloans had always been bitter enemies of Duff and of late months particularly so. This was their challenging answer to the killing of Tubbs. Why go around Robin Hood's barn to guess that a friend of Dan's had done it? Since he had no proof of their guilt he could not arrest any of them. Privately the sheriff was glad of that. He was convinced that if he brought any more of them to town there would be a battle on the streets between the two factions. The responsibility of that was something with which he could not cope.

Webber did not give up his point readily. "Outside of the Sloan crowd a dozen men hated Duff for what he had done to them," he insisted. "Any one of them could have killed him."

When Matt Chunn heard the news he carried it to Nora Hamilton. It was his opinion that one of the young hotheads among the Sloan adherents had shot Duff. He found Nora reading a letter. She had been crying. Word had just reached her that her brother had died of a hemorrhage.

"Someone has told you," he said at once.

"Told me what?" she asked.

"That Duff was shot an hour ago. Some guy stood at the window of his room and plugged him. The feud has done bust wide open again for sure now."

"Who did it?"

"He didn't leave his card. Nobody is gonna mourn for Dan. He was a bad egg certain. But folks aren't going to like the way this was done."

"They don't suspect the Sloans?" Nora asked quickly.

"Nobody else but." Matt added an explanation. "I don't reckon either Sum or Randy did it. Maybe one of Joe Tubbs' kin."

"They'll try to put it on Randy and Sumner."

"Y'betcha." Matt's curiosity got the better of him. "What you been crying for?"

Because she knew the crusty old fellow liked her she did not resent his abrupt query. "I have just been reading a letter telling of the death of someone who once was a dear friend of mine." She added gently, "My brother."

His faded eyes rested on her shrewdly. "When you git to be my age you'll know that dying ain't the worst thing can happen to a man. Think of Dan Duff. He would of been better dead ten years ago."

"I don't have to be your age to find that out, Matt," she said. "I was crying because of that. Years ago I lost him."

"A sort of good-bye cry, I reckon."

She was surprised at his understanding. "You might call it that." Out of her experience a protest broke. "There isn't anything you can do for people. You can't change them."

"You are thinking of Randy too."

"Yes. He can't even change himself. He is driven by something outside of his own will. Though he hates this feud, it has him trapped. He can't escape from it. One killing leads to another."

"It will be that way long as Anse is alive," Matt agreed.

"Would it do any good if he married Julia?" she asked.

He stared at her in astonishment. "Randy ain't going to marry that girl. She has set her cap for that fellow Bancroft. It would be crazy for her and Randy to get married. It wouldn't help a mite. Anse would fling her off and hate the Sloans more. How come you to say anything so dumb?"

"Randy likes Julia very much and she is more than half in love with him."

"Nothing to that." His veined freckled hand swept away the suggestion. "She's a born flirt and he's forbidden fruit. So she hankers to get his scalp on her belt maybe."

"I don't think she is a flirt. She likes attention from men. All girls do. But she doesn't really lead them on."

"They can't either one of them be so foolish," he said testily. "You ain't got a thing to go on, have you?"

"She comes to life when Randy is around. I've watched her eyes follow him. If other things were equal she would fling John Bancroft over for Randy in a minute."

"Yesterday she took the stage for Chrysolite to spend a week there with her brother, but if you ask me it ain't Bill she is going to see but Bancroft. She's wearing his ring. Story is they are to get hitched next month."

"On the twenty-second. I'm making a wedding dress for her, but I'm not sure she will ever wear it. Julia does not act like a girl in love with the man she is engaged to marry. Her mind is full of Randy Sloan." She added dryly, aware that he knew her own feeling, "I ought to know."

"Made her choice, hasn't she?" he asked tartly. "Glommed on to Bancroft because she knew what she wanted. That girl has her feet on the ground. Randy is a good-looking young devil, different from the bucks around town. Likely enough she has looked him over, but she knows doggoned well he's no kind of husband for her, even if he didn't have the blood of some of her folks on his hands." He turned on Nora, his voice high and thin. "Why don't you get in and fight for him yore own self if you want him?"

The young woman smiled ruefully and shook her head. What weapons had she with which to oppose this glamorous girl, so lovely and so exciting? The sister of a convict, plain in the face, hampered by a bad reputation, a drab working woman who sewed for Julia and others — these were poor assets to recommend her to the love of a man like Randy.

25

RANDY SLOAN and Tim Jolly were riding a ridge above a small park where larkspur grew. This was beyond the range where Box S cattle usually fed, but occasionally strays wandered this far and ate the lovely blue and purple blossoms that were to them a deadly poison. During the flowering season riders patrolled the district to push stock away from the vicinity.

"Looks like cows would know enough to leave larkspur alone," Tim commented.

Sloan grinned across at the cowboy who was still a little bleary-eyed from a week-end spree. "Looks like humans would know enough to leave rotgut alone when they know it poisons them," he replied.

"Sure enough," Tim agreed. "Me, I'm off of liquor for quite some time."

A shot sounded from back of a bend in front of them. A few seconds later came another, no louder but nearer.

"A rifle and a six-gun," Randy said. "I reckon we better investigate."

They rode forward to a clump of stunted pines on the edge of the prong. Here they dismounted and moved cautiously on foot to see what was taking place in the land pocket below. It was an offset from the rolling country above the plain, shaped like a horseshoe, the inner part strewn with large boulders. Back of a flat-surfaced rock a man was crouched, revolver in hand. It was clear that the weapon was not going to help him much since another man with a Winchester rifle was standing in the gateway of the pocket a hundred yards distant pumping lead at him. The one back of the boulder was outranged. Presently his foe would circle along the foot of the ridge and drive him from his cover.

"The guy nearest us is Homer Bascom," Tim said. "And the other is Clint LePage. Looks like we ain't in this scrap."

"We'll take a hand," Randy decided. "Enough to stop it. Keep out of sight in the brush and I'll slip over to the clump of pines on the point. Give me two-three minutes to get there. Don't shoot to hit. When LePage finds out Bascom has help he'll light out quick."

"Maybe we better settle the sidewinder's hash right now. He's a bad *hombre.*"

"No," Randy ordered sharply. "We'll handle this my way."

"You're the doctor. Get going."

Presently Randy's rifle boomed out from the pines. Almost before the sound of it died Tim Jolly's gun spoke. Spurts of dust rose a few feet from LePage. The man's glance swept along the ridge to the two points from which puffs of smoke were rising. He fired once toward the pines, then raced for the horse grazing near him. Swinging into the saddle, he turned his mount and kicked it to a gallop. The guns from the ridge roared again as he dashed through the gap and disappeared into a land fold outside.

"Drop that gun, Homer," Randy shouted. "We're not going to hurt you."

Bascom dropped the weapon. Randy slithered down a steep slope from the bluff while Tim went to get the horses.

The trembling hands of Bascom were in the air. He was still a thoroughly frightened man. "Don't shoot me, Randy," he begged.

"I thought you and LePage claimed to be friends."

"He would of killed me if you hadn't come along."

It came to Sloan that this rabbit-hearted little man with the worried lost-dog look on his face might be of help as a witness since he had evidently broken with Cottrell's killers.

"Drop your arms and quit shivering," he said. "We're not murderers. What is the trouble between you and LePage?"

"He got sore at me. Fact is, I got off on the wrong foot, you might say."

"You mean running with LePage and his crowd?"

"That's right. I didn't figure things would go the way they have. I'm no killer. I ain't ever shot at a man till right now. It got so I couldn't go along with Clint. This mo'ning I told him so."

"Because he killed Joe Tubbs, you mean?"

Bascom took alarm. It was not safe to talk too much. "If he did. I'm not saying so."

"He was afraid you were going to tell what you knew and decided he had better rub you out."

"I dunno why he got mad," Bascom said doggedly. "After I left his place he got his rifle and followed me. When I saw him coming I got scared. He ran me into these rocks. I dassent go back to my cabin. He'll lay for me if I do."

Don't crowd him, Randy told himself. *He is afraid to rat on his gang. Let him figure it out that it is the best way out of the jam he is in. Go easy on him.*

"You don't have to go back to your ranch," Randy said. "You can stay at the Box S for a while and see how this works out."

The homesteader stared at him, eyebrows lifted in the perpetual bewilderment they seemed to express. He was both surprised and suspicious. Yet if he dared accept it the Box S would be the surest place of refuge for the present. His first impulse was to justify himself.

"I hadn't a thing to do with the shooting at Sumner or the killing of Tubbs. I never did have a hate against you Sloans."

"If I thought you had I wouldn't be asking you to the ranch," Randy answered. "You just got into bad company for a while."

Tim brought the horses up and Bascom went to reclaim his mount from the rocks among which it was grazing. While he was away Randy explained to the Box S rider that Bascom would go back with them to the ranch and was to be treated as a guest. He was to be made to feel he would be protected if he trusted them.

Bascom helped with the work around the ranch. The Sloans explained to him that he could leave any time he wished. All he need do was saddle and say "Adios" if he did not like their company. He could go home and patch up a peace with LePage if that was what he wanted. The mere suggestion alarmed their guest. If he did that it would be the same as committing suicide, he said. He was easier in mind than he had been in a long time. If they would let him stay he would be grateful.

Within twenty-four hours he came to Randy and volunteered to tell all he knew. Sumner joined them and the three walked out to the corral where they could talk and not be heard. It was hard for Bascom to get started but when he did the homesteader found it a relief to pour out the story.

He had never been wholly a member of the gang but after becoming intimate with LePage he had gradually been dragged in deeper. From talk he had heard it was Duff who had killed Watt Saulsbury the shotgun messenger at the first Blue Creek stage robbery. His confederates had been Shonsey and LePage. When the second holdup was under discussion Bascom was to have been one of the road agents but he had lost his nerve and pretended to be sick before the actual stick-up. Duff had shot the Kentucky hillbilly after Bancroft had fired at them. Cottrell had been back of the second robbery, though he had not shared in the stolen gold. Bascom had been given a hundred dollars as his quota.

For shooting Joe Tubbs the price paid LePage by Cottrell was three hundred dollars. He had been offered six hundred to get either Sumner or Randy Sloan. By this time Bascom was a man living in terror. He could not help showing this, and he realized the killers were watching him suspiciously. To allay their doubts he had called on Dan Duff the afternoon of the gunman's last day. He had found Duff in deep dejection, obsessed with the fear he was going to die of his wound. He wanted to see a preacher to confess his sins. While he was still talking about this Anse Cottrell had dropped in to visit the wounded man. Within three hours of that time Duff had been shot. Bascom was convinced the man had talked too much and that Cottrell, to prevent a confession, had arranged his death.

"LePage?" asked Sumner.

"Couldn't have been LePage. He was at his ranch when it was done."

"You have no guess who?"

"No."

"Might have been Ducret," Sumner said.

Bascom shook his head. "Don't think so. The talk in the gang is that Ducret won't do that kind of a killing."

"We'll never know who pulled the trigger," Randy was of opinion. "But we can feel sure who ordered it done."

"I didn't suppose I would ever live to see the day when I would be sorry Dan Duff was dead," Sumner remarked. "But if I had known it was in his mind to confess I would have sat outside his window and guarded him."

The brothers impressed on Bascom the need of constant vigilance. He was a key witness of great importance and Cottrell's outfit would do their best to get rid of him. Unless he was with at least two of the Box S men he must never leave the ranch headquarters, and even in and around the house he had better always keep a gun handy.

"I'm no kind of a gun slinger," Bascom lamented. "Against LePage or Ducret I wouldn't last longer than a snowflake in Yuma."

Randy grinned cheerfully. "We aim to keep you alive. You ought to be safe here if you don't get careless — safer than either Sum or I anyhow. Keep whistling and you'll find you get a kick out of it."

Bascom wished he were like the Sloans, but he did not think that any amount of whistling would give him any pleasure in being made a target of.

26

RANDY SLOAN was jubilant when a letter came from Miles Hancock appointing a meeting at the Toltec Hotel in Chrysolite to settle some details not covered in the option signed with the railroad company. This must mean that the New Yorker had decided in favor of the Bigg's Bend route. Sumner foresaw difficulties. He did not intend to let his brother go alone, yet under the circumstances both of them ought not to leave the ranch at the same time. It was important that Bascom be safeguarded. Also, his testimony ought to be put in the form of a sworn affidavit as soon as possible.

Morg Vance offered a solution. "What say the whole kit and passel of us ride in tonight and see Judge Simmons? He can fix up a paper for Homer to sign. Either Tim or I will go on to Chrysolite with Randy and the rest will mosey back here to the ranch."

"That listens good to me," Randy said. "We'll make it a night ride. Once I'm out of Round Top nobody will bother me. Hugh Pressman will be tickled to come to the Box S and help out while we are short-handed."

Sumner did not like this. If any trouble jumped up at Randy he wanted to be with him, but he realized that one of them should be at home. After all it was not likely that any of their enemies would know his brother was at Chrysolite. Randy would not have to stay there more than a day or two.

"Fine," Tim Jolly said. "There's a girl I know waits on the table at one of the mine boardinghouses. That way I can throw two birds at one stone."

Sumner vetoed that. Tim was a harum-scarum youth too intent on fun to be dependable. "Morg will go with Randy," he dissented.

The five of them jogged into town in the cool of the evening. It was the dark of the moon. They took a trail over the hills not likely to have any other travelers and circled the town to come in back of Judge Simmons' residence.

The judge lived in one of the two brick houses in Round Top. It was a well-kept place with a paling fence, bay window, and all the architectural curlicues fashionable at the period. Judge Jefferson Simmons opened his eyes wide with surprise as this large delegation of visitors filed into the parlor. He was a handsome man well past middle life. His ruddy face set in a frame of fine silvery hair and his excellently tailored suit of broadcloth gave him a unique distinction in this district where sunbaked faces and dusty wrinkled clothes predominated. The man's dignity and a sense of his complete integrity made him respected by all who knew him.

He seated his guests, showing no hurry to find out why they had come. Randy sketched briefly the rescue of Bascom in the hill pocket and what he had since told them, after which he kept silent while the judge questioned the nervous little man. Later Simmons sat at his desk and wrote down the faltering confession. This he read aloud and Bascom signed it in the presence of Simmons' maid and houseman who also wrote their names as witnesses without having heard the context of the paper.

"I'll keep this in my safe until it is required," the judge said.

Sumner had already sent written thanks to the judge for his service in securing his freedom but before they left he put his feeling into spoken words. To the pardoned convict what he said sounded dry and cold, but the judge understood the repressed emotion back of them.

The Box S party separated in the brush outside of town where they had left their mounts, Sumner, Tim, and Homer Bascom to return to the ranch. Before he left, Sumner made an almost pleading request of his brother, "For God's sake, Randy, keep out of trouble this time."

"I'll run like a scared rabbit if it even looks my way," Randy promised.

He watched the homeward-bound party ride into the darkness before he mentioned to Vance that there would be a slight delay in starting their long ride. He had to make a call on a friend.

Morg exploded promptly. "Now looky here, fellow. I ain't going to stand for no such foolishness. I been appointed to dry-nurse you and I aim to bring you back alive."

Apparently Randy did not hear him. "The young lady lives in this end of town. She rode out to hurry Sum up to save our lives. Seems we ought to drop in and say thanks."

The cowpuncher grumbled but gave way. They left their mounts tied where they were and walked to the back door of Nora Hamilton's store. The house was dark. A voice inside inquired who was knocking. When Randy told her she opened hurriedly.

"Come in quick," she urged. "Has anybody seen you?"

"No. This is my friend, Morg Vance. Morg — Miss Hamilton."

Nora said, "You'd better not stay. They might find your horses again."

"Not this time they won't. We're here to say thanks for your help."

"Haven't you had enough of this town yet?" she demanded, a scolding tone in her voice. "Every time you're here you get into trouble. I get worried sick."

"That's fine," he told her cheerfully. "Every man ought to have a woman to worry over him. Have you one, Morg?"

"Me, no, I'm only an old vinegaroon. Women don't get hot and bothered over me." He said to Nora: "I been appointed chaperoon over this young buckaroo. But onct I was some Lochinvar myself. Don't you pay a mite of attention to me, miss. I'm deef and dumb and blind. Just you go right ahead."

Nora felt the hot blood racing over her face. She was glad of the darkness. There was a quick pounding in her veins, a warm and passionate urge. Later she would whip herself with scorn for it. To this man she meant nothing, or at least not much, a woman with whom to pass time when he had nobody else to amuse him. He was like that.

She was conscious of her scant attire. Her feet were bare, her long hair cascading down her back and across her shoulders. When the knock had come she had found time only to fling a wrap over her nightgown for fear the need of haste was urgent.

She did not know that even in that dim light her hair had the golden gleam of ripe wheat and the hollow between her firm swelling breasts a glimpse of sheer beauty. It was a habit of her ill-starred life to underestimate her values.

"We mustn't keep you up," Randy said. "It's the first chance Morg and I have had to tell you how much we feel we owe you for what you did the other night. We're on our way to Chrysolite and stopped because we did not know when we would see you again, times being as troubled as they are."

"To Chrysolite?" she repeated.

"To meet Mr. Hancock. It looks like we've won the fight for the railroad."

"I'm so glad for you."

"I knew you would be. You're a grand friend, Nora.

Someday I'm going to tell you about that."

"You'd better go now," she said in a low voice. "I'm not dressed."

"I never saw you so lovely."

"All cats look alike in the dark," she replied, striving for lightness. "By the way, you'll probably see Julia. She is in Chrysolite visiting her brother."

"I don't think so. I'll be trying to escape observation."

Morg spoke up. "One thing sure is he ain't going to go gallin' in Chrysolite. I aim to see about that certain. We'll be going now, ma'am. Randy has said it for both of us. We're mighty pleased at what you did for us. Maybe I'll dance at yore wedding."

"Is that a proposal, Mr. Vance?" Nora asked.

The old cowpuncher slapped his thigh gleefully. "Well now, that's an idea. We can use a young lady like this one at the Box S. If you can't make the grade, Randy, I'll try my hand."

"I'll let you know when to start, Morg," his friend answered.

"If you'll please stop talking nonsense and go," Nora said.

But before Randy left she told him a bit of news, that she had received a letter from Nebraska notifying her of the death of her brother.

"I won't pretend that I'm not glad for you," he said. "It breaks the last tie between you and your old unhappy life. You are free of it at last."

"Yes," she agreed doubtfully. She had no certainty of having escaped her past. The weight of it was still on her. She wondered if a woman could ever turn a page and write on a clean sheet, *I begin a new life today.*

As they walked warily down the alley toward their mounts Morg barked a question at his companion, "Why didn't you kiss yore girl?"

Randy might have answered with a paradox, that he would have kissed her perhaps if he had not wanted to so much. Instead, his eyes searching the darkness for any blur of motion, he asked, "Is she my girl?"

"If you don't know you'd better find out," Morg snorted. "In my time we talked turkey and didn't fiddle-foot."

Day was beginning to break when they swung down from their saddles in a wagon yard at Chrysolite.

27

MORG was still deep in sleep when Randy rose and dressed for his eleven o'clock appointment with Miles Hancock. It had been an all-night ride and the old-timer had reached an age when he needed more time than a younger man to recuperate from unusual exertion. Randy tiptoed out of the room, glad to get away alone. It hurt his pride to have somebody along to protect him in a quiet place like this. Round Top was a cow town, the center of the feud, but Chrysolite was in a mining district far outside the range of Cottrell's warriors.

As he walked out of a small restaurant after breakfast he came face to face with Bill Cottrell who stared at him in surprise.

"Aren't you off your reservation, Randy?" he asked.

"They say travel broadens a guy," Sloan answered. "How's everything?"

"All right. I'm running the old man's freight outfit. He's aiming to make a business man out of me." The hint of mirth vanished from his eyes, driven away by a misgiving that had flashed into his mind. "You are not the only guy off his range today. Clint LePage dropped in on us for a little visit last night."

Randy knew this was a warning for him to be careful. "Alone?" he asked lightly.

"I don't know. Saw him on the street a half-hour ago. If you are not going anywhere in particular I'll stroll along with you." He spoke as casually as Sloan had.

"That would be nice, but I won't take the time of a big businessman to show me the town," he said, smiling amiably.

Bill's anxiety broke through his feigned carelessness. "For God's sake, Randy, what brought you and him here?"

"I came to see a man. Your guess of why LePage is here is good as mine. Since we are down to cases, I don't like it. I think that somehow he learned I was to be here."

"Maybe you talked with someone."

"No. It must have come from this end." Randy had no sooner spoken than he guessed how word of his coming had leaked out. Hancock had mentioned the appointment to his nephew John Bancroft who had relayed the news to Cottrell. If this was the case LePage had probably not come alone. He would have at least one other gunman to side him. "There won't be any fireworks till night, Bill, and not then if I can help it," he said.

He left Bill troubled in spirit. Within a week two men had been killed. Bill felt sure there would be more. There was nothing he could do about it.

Hancock was in no friendly mood. He told Randy bluntly what he thought of this barbarous bloodshed and added that if it were feasible he would cut both Bigg's Bend and Round Top off the route and run by way of Federal Notch.

"Call off Anse Cottrell and there won't be any more killings," Sloan said.

"That's your story," the New Yorker replied coldly. "You almost talked me into believing it before this last outbreak. This man Duff was wounded by your brother while your friends were trying to free you from jail and later he was murdered. Facts talk, Mr. Sloan."

"They don't always tell the truth, sir. Anse Cottrell is a very suave and cruel man bitten by a craving for power and money."

Randy went over the story of his arrest and the plan to lynch him and Morgan which necessitated a rescue. Evidence had been uncovered which showed that Cottrell men with the approval of their leader had pulled off the stage robbery. He had reason to believe that Duff had been shot to prevent him from making a confession. Since the life of his informant was at stake he could not yet bring forward his witness, but if Mr. Hancock would get in touch with Judge Simmons, a lawyer of great repute, he could get confirmation of what Randy had just told him.

"You claim to be a peaceable citizen, yet at the present moment you are carrying a concealed weapon," Hancock charged. He pointed to the slight bulge below the shoulder under Sloan's coat.

"Not very much concealed," Randy said. "I don't intend to let myself be killed like a sitting quail, Mr. Hancock. Ten minutes ago Bill Cottrell, a son of old Anse, warned me that LePage, one of his father's gunmen, reached here last night. We agreed without exactly saying so that he must have heard of our appointment and came to prevent it. The only way he could do that was to kill me. His timing was a little wrong, but that won't keep him from trying to get me. This man LePage is the one who shot Tubbs a few days ago."

"So Mr. Cottrell's son warned you that his father had sent a man to kill you," Hancock scoffed. "Really, Mr. Sloan, that seems hardly likely."

"But true none the less. Neither Bill nor his sister go along with their father in his program of destruction."

"If you believe what you are telling me why don't you call in the police?"

Randy's smile was cynical. "What could they do? They are not mind readers. It is their business to arrest a man after he has committed a crime and not before."

"Then I advise you to go to your hotel and stay there after we have agreed on the details we are here to discuss. I'll have my lawyer draw up the contract at once. You can sign it tomorrow morning and leave at once for home."

"You may be sure I'll avoid trouble with this ruffian if I can," Randy promised.

They talked over thoroughly the railroad needs at Bigg's Bend, the extent of the yards, and the location of the roundhouse and station. Randy agreed to deed over all the land asked for by the New Yorker. Holding his brother's power of attorney, he was prepared to sign for him too.

Before they parted Hancock congratulated Randy grimly. "Mr. Sloan, you are going to make a lot of money from the sale of your land — if you live long enough to realize the profit."

"I feel right healthy and I'm going to take good care of myself and wear a slicker when it rains," Randy said cheerfully.

As he started back to the hotel he did not feel so confident as he had claimed. His wary eyes covered every foot of the street and building fronts, but a blast might come from any door or window. He did not think any attempt on his life would be in open daylight on a public highway, but assassins were not always reasonable. An angry impulse might outweigh discretion.

In front of the office of the Sure Fire mine a man and a woman were standing. The man was John Bancroft. The woman had her back turned to Randy, a slim straight back he would have known among a thousand. Julia always had to him the poised grace he saw in a well-bred race horse, the touch of pride that gives class. Bancroft passed into the office and as he went she lifted her arm in a gesture of light farewell. Randy thought, *She is beautiful as only youth can be, with life flowing through her so abundantly.*

She turned and saw Sloan. He could see her slender figure tighten.

"I left Bill a few minutes ago," she said in her low contralto. "You ought not to be here."

He asked her why.

A frown knitted her brow. "You know why. That Clint LePage is in town — and Hod Crane, the man who was wounded the day your brother came back. Bill thinks they are here to make trouble."

They had fallen into step and were moving down the walk toward a row of cottonwoods that bordered the creek at the end of the street.

"Are you asking me to run out of town because they are here?"

"Do you have to wait around until murder is done?"

"Far as I am concerned they can live long as Methuselah — if they let me and my friends alone. LePage is a hired killer. He murdered Joe Tubbs. We intend to defend ourselves."

Julia did not dare to ask him by whom LePage was hired. She knew what the answer would be. But anger ran through her. "I say a plague on both our houses. One is as bad as the other. I'm living in the hope of getting out of this lawless country."

He glanced at the diamond ring flashing on her hand. "That may be soon. I hear you are getting married next month."

She flung back at him, her head lifted, "That is true."

"Maybe he will take you away from here back to New York where law is swinging a club on every corner."

"How can he do that when his business is to run the Sure Fire mine?"

They had reached the bank of the small creek, the low water of which rippled over the rounded stones in its bed.

"If I had you and Bill to deal with we could end this feud in five minutes," he said. "I've been wanting to thank you properly for being such a friendly enemy. It's a pity ——"

The crash of a gun sounded. Instantly Randy flung the girl through the willows growing along the edge of the stream into the sandy wash below. He plunged after her down the bank, falling in a huddled heap on top of her. Without waiting to find if she was hurt he rose to a crouch and peered through the brush, a revolver already in his hand. A running man was just disappearing back of a barn fifty yards distant. Randy's eyes searched right and left to make sure the fellow did not have a partner in the attack. There was no cover behind which one could be hiding. There had been only one shot. Evidently the gunman had been playing a lone hand.

"He's legged it," Randy said, turning back to the girl. "You all right?"

Her eyes sparkled with excitement. "There is no bullet in me, if that is what you want to know, but a man just threw me in the creek. I'm not sure yet how many bones are broken." She ran her hands over her arms and thighs in a pretense of looking for breaks.

"You had the worst of it," he admitted. "I fell on something nice and soft."

"Pick another girl for a cushion next time please. Are you sure he has gone?"

Randy scanned the terrain again. "I think so, but we'll cross the creek and come into town from the other side."

He helped Julia to her feet, running his eyes down her slender gracious figure. "No permanent damage done, but you have quite a bit of Arizona on your cheek." He drew a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped the wet sand from her face, and kissed the place.

She looked at him quickly, not sure whether she should show anger at this audacity, but he seemed so innocent that she decided on a perfunctory reproof. She flashed the ring on her finger and murmured, "Sir, I am an engaged woman." Her heart was beating fast.

"I am trying to forget that," he answered. Briskly he added, to make the point that his indiscretion was forgiven, "Yes, I think it would be safer to return another way."

Her eyes were on the lazy little brook. She was in silent agreement with him that the incident had better not be discussed.

"How do we get across?" she asked. "The road looks wet to me."

"I'll build a bridge for you."

Picking her up, he waded into the creek. He felt the pounding of her heart beneath his hand. Her arm crept around his neck for support. The pulse in her finger tips beat against the one in his throat. As he splashed through the shallow water he did not look at her, since his eyes had to watch the smooth slippery rocks to miss them and find a sandy footing. Yet he was intensely aware of an emotion hot and disturbing in him that reached out to her.

He put her down on the farther bank. Her eyes lifted shyly to his, color racing in her cheeks. She had always been so proudly sure of herself, but now her lips were tremulous and her knees weak. A wave of strange recklessness swept her. Then they were in each other's arms, a wildness in their kisses.

Julia was the first to break away. She stared at him, appalled at the passion that had carried her so far. Presently anger stirred in her.

"We are complete fools," she cried stormily. "I'm not in love with you nor you with me. Even if we were it would not matter. There is blood between us neither could forget."

Randy knew that what she said was true. The past must always divide them, and she was right in saying that the emotion which dragged them together was something less than love. But he mentioned by way of defense that both of them were human.

She swept that aside scornfully. "Why make excuses that don't excuse us? We are enemies. I daresay you have killed some of my kin. What makes it worse for me is that I am engaged to a man I want to marry. There's no place for you in my life nor for me in yours. Go to Nora Hamilton. She loves you, even though she is too good for you."

"I am no enemy of yours," he denied. "I never could be. We are not likely to see each other again except at a distance, so I'll tell you one thing now. I'll always remember your kisses and be glad you gave them to me. You can't take them back."

They walked across a pasture and cut in to town, a yard of space between them all the way. At the door of her hotel they separated. She held out her hand, breaking a long silence.

"Good-bye," she said in a low voice. "We'd better not see each other again." There was a ripple of laughter in her face. "We are too explosive. But I'm not mad at you. I'm not sorry for what we did. And do take care of yourself."

He watched her walk across the lobby with the lilting step that always seemed to him to express her joy in life. It was likely they would never meet again unless it was as the most casual of acquaintances. He pushed aside a triumphant unworthy thought that jumped to his mind, *She is wearing your ring, Mr. John Bancroft, but there is a corner of her heart that will always be mine.*

Morgan Vance came awake when Randy walked into their room. "Hey, what time is it?" he asked sleepily. "Where you been?"

Randy flung a quotation at him gaily. "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise."

"I haven't got any aunt," Morg answered. "Leastways I'm not sure. She ran off with a slick drummer [*] twenty odd years ago. What's she got to do with it? I asked you where you been."

"I've been fixing up a contract to get rich, serving as a target for a bad marksman, and carrying the prettiest girl in Arizona across a creek in my arms."

The old-timer sat up in bed abruptly. "You're joshin'

[*] A traveling salesman was then called a drummer.

me, fellow," he said querulously. "You'd ought to have waked me. Sum said I was to stick closer than a burr to you."

"You were having such a good time snoring I hated to disturb you. But I wasn't loading you. This has been my busy morning."

"Hold yore horses a minute. Are you telling me some guy tried to plug you?"

"That's part of it."

"Well, spill it. The whole story."

Randy related to him the day's adventures, omitting the emotional content of them. Morg blew his top with rich and vitriolic profanity. The purport of his complaint was that if Randy was going to play tricks like that on him and leave him out of things he might just as well have stayed at the ranch.

After dealing with the situation competently Morg's resentment subsided abruptly. "My belly is flat as an empty mail sack," he announced. "I gotta have grub. Where do I get it in this burg?"

Randy told him he had eaten at a Chinese restaurant where the food was good, plentiful, and cheap. His companion demanded to be led to it. The price of the breakfast was two bits. It included corn mush, flapjacks with molasses, ham and eggs, and coffee. Morg waved aside the corn mush as kid's pap, but got a refill on the other edibles.

A man wearing chaps walked into the restaurant and at sight of Vance gave a yelp of joy. "You doggoned old mossback last time I seen you was down at Cananea," he shouted. "You was buckin' the wheel after the bull-fight. What jail they been keepin' you in?" He thumped Morg on the back with lusty enthusiasm.

Between bites Morg introduced him to Randy. "This waddy claims his name is Sloppy Jack," he said. "I recomember his being arrested for fragrancy at Laredo onct. Sloppy, meet Mr. Sloan."

"Now looky here, Morg," the cowboy protested. "I ain't been called that for more'n ten years. No use rakin' it up again. Glad to meet you, Mr. Sloan. The name is Jack Lawson." The man's hand clung to that of Randy because he forget to take it away. A thought was stabbing into his mind. He had heard the name of Sloan in Pete's Palace less than ten minutes before.

"The way he's hangin' on to you, Randy, he must be figurin' on making a touch. Don't you come through. He's owed me three bucks for fifteen years."

Lawson did not hear Morg's persiflage. He was reconstructing the scene in the saloon. Two men at a table not three feet from him talking in whispers but with an occasional lift of the voice that made snatches audible. The name of Sloan coupled with a threat.

He blurted out what he had heard, adding that maybe it did not mean a thing since they had been drinking a good deal evidently.

The eyes of Morg and Randy met. Morg asked a question.

"Was one of them a long slabsided guy thin as a rail with a face that would curdle milk and the other a stocky bird wearing an old hat that had a rattlesnake skin for a band?"

"That's right."

Randy said slowly, after a moment of thought, "Maybe we ought to have a word with those gents."

Hurriedly Lawson spoke up. "Say, I didn't aim to ——

"You are not making trouble," Randy explained. "It started more than twenty years ago."

Morg rubbed his unshaven chin thoughtfully. "Depends on what you are going to say to them," he said, answering Randy's suggestion.

"I thought I would explain to them that it annoys me to have fellows taking pot shots at me when I am with a lady."

"Sounds reasonable." Morg's faded eyes lit up. "Let's go."

"They looked like pretty tough *hombres* to me," Larson mentioned, eyeing doubtfully Randy's boyish face.

Randy rose. "That's the general impression. We'll find out how correct it is. Where is this Pete's Palace?"

"Down the street in the next block on the other side, but don't say I sent you there."

Randy and Morg crossed the road and moved down the sidewalk. The younger man outlined procedure to his friend. His opinion was that there would not be any shooting, though he admitted he might be wrong.

They walked through the wing door into the saloon. It was a large room with a long bar at the right as they entered. In the rear were gaming tables and others near the front for drinking. Not more than half a dozen men were present. LePage and Crane were standing in front of the bar. The newcomers passed back of them and ranged up on their left.

LePage was next to Randy. The long man glanced at him and instantly stiffened. "Goddlemighty!" he exclaimed.

"Don't be afraid, Clint," Randy said. "I'm not a ghost."

"Why the hell should I be scared?" LePage demanded.

"Thought maybe you did'nt know you missed me an hour ago."

"I wasn't shooting at you," the man blustered.

"Trying to lay it on Hod, are you? I don't blame you. Anse won't like your muffing all your chances. First Sumner, then me. You did get Joe Tubbs, but even so it's a low percentage."

"Who says I killed Tubbs? Or that I tried to get you and Sum?"

"The news is getting around. Sumner and I are flattered that you are to get six hundred dollars apiece for us whereas you got only three hundred for Tubbs."

"That's a lie. I don't have to listen to that kind of talk. And I don't have to lay on Hod anything I do. I stand back of it myself."

"You mean you stand back of the brush, you dirty four-flushing killer." The jeering note had dropped out of Randy's voice and left it hard and cold. "I've had enough of you. We're serving notice on you and Hod to get out of this town within an hour."

LePage felt a leaden hand clutching at his stomach. This was fighting talk, and he did not want to stand up to Sloan on equal terms.

"That's no kind of way to talk, Randy," he said from a throat dry as chalk.

"Sixty minutes," Randy replied. "If you are here then it will be a showdown. You are not going to get another chance to shoot me in the back."

"You know I wouldn't do that, Randy." The voice of the man had fallen to a wheedling murmur. "Let's be reasonable and take a drink together. We'll talk this over friendly."

Randy glanced at the clock. "Fifty-eight minutes left," he warned.

The harassed glance of LePage slid around the room. Back of the bar the man in the white apron was still holding the whisky bottle from which he had been pouring a drink. The customers had shifted their positions to be out of the line of fire and were backed against the wall watching the scene intently, aware that guns would smoke unless somebody crawfished. To the killer it was plain he would get no help here. Hod Crane had not yet declared himself.

"Take it back, Randy," he urged. "You got me wrong. I'm not here to make you trouble. But if you serve notice on me to leave I can't go. You know that."

"What I have said stands," Sloan said quietly.

Hod Crane spoke for the first time, his voice hard and low. "You can't order me to leave town and get away with it. I'm calling yore bluff."

The bartender cut in hurriedly. "Not here, gents. If you're having a difficulty go outside."

Nobody paid any attention to his protest.

Randy said, the words falling cold and clear, "I'll put it straight, Hod; you were hired along with LePage to murder me."

Crane's revolver flashed out, and at the same moment the bottle in the hand of the bartender swept down on his wrist. The bullet plowed into the floor and the weapon dropped from its owner's paralyzed arm. The man caught at his disabled wrist, pain distorting his face.

LePage half drew his .45, then pushed it back into the holster. Morg and Randy both had him covered. He called out quickly, "No need of any gunplay."

"Not if you pull yore freight *pronto,*" Morg told him.

"All right," LePage retorted irritably. "You boys are too damned quick on the trigger. I got nothing against either of you."

"Sure you haven't," Morg jeered. "Remember, we're the same two you wanted to hang the other night."

Crane was cursing furiously, bending over with the pain. His companion said, "Let's get outa here, Hod. You'll need a doctor for that busted arm."

LePage pushed through the swing wings of the door followed by Crane.

After they had gone Sloan said to the bartender, "Much obliged for your help."

The bartender answered angrily. "Why do you have to come in here to pull off your fuss? We run a quiet place and it gives us a bad name when fellows like you come in and make trouble." He looked at the whisky splashed on the floor from the broken bottle. "It will cost you a dollar."

"Cheap at the price," Randy said, and laid a silver dollar on the bar. "I'm still obliged, friend."

"Do you reckon the other guys will beat it?" a customer asked. "I've heard tell they are bad men with a gun."

"LePage is a killer," Morg answered contemptuously. "But like Randy says, he cuts his men down from back of brush. Crane is tough enough, but he won't be using his pistol arm for a few days. They'll light out all right."

His prediction turned out to be correct. As soon as a doctor had bound Crane's injured arm they saddled and rode out of town. Bill Cottrell brought Sloan the news of their departure. He had already heard of the fracas at Pete's Palace.

"Did you have to go hunting those fellows to stir up a row with them?" Bill asked, much annoyed.

"I don't like being shot at from cover while I am taking a walk." Randy's eyes were steel-hard. "You might mention that to Anse Cottrell."

"You don't mean you were shot at today?"

"An hour ago, because I am signing up with the railroad."

Bill stared at Randy unhappily. There was nothing to be said that would mend the situation. He turned on his heel and left.

28

WHEN Sheriff Walsh questioned Anita Jelks about the killing of Dan Duff to find out whether she had seen anybody hanging around prior to the murder Anse Cottrell took care to be present. Though he had no reason to think she could give any evidence incriminating him it was better to be sure.

Mrs. Jelks was a middle-aged woman, lean, wiry, and flat-chested. She sat on the edge of the chair, plainly ill at ease. No, she had not noticed anybody watching the house either during the day or early evening. A few hours before the shooting two visitors had called on Duff, the nester Homer Bascom and Mr. Cottrell. The wounded man was in better spirits after they had gone.

Anse explained that he had cheered Duff up, assuring him that the doctor had said he was much improved. The sick man had expressed fears that the Sloans would sneak into town and get him.

"Sure you didn't see any of the Sloan crowd around?" the sheriff asked Mrs. Jelks.

Yes, she was sure.

"Lucky for you that you didn't, Anita," Anse said. "They are a bad lot and wouldn't think twice of killing you if they thought you knew anything. But you must not worry. We will protect you."

Her reluctant gaze was drawn to him. His thick gross body was hunkered low in the chair and his beady eyes were fastened on her. She shuddered, the fear heavy in her that he might have seen her as he was leaving on that dreadful night. Perhaps he was warning her not to talk. She could not be sure.

Walsh said, as he and Cottrell walked down the road, "She knows something she isn't telling and she's scared to death."

Anse ridiculed the idea. If she knew anything more about the crime there was no reason why she should not tell it. Yet the fear worried him that she had seen him. While Walsh quizzed her she had seemed on the verge of a breakdown. She had been in terror, and it was of him she was afraid. He had read it in her eyes. Or perhaps it was only his sense of guilt that made him think so. Still, Walsh had seen it too.

Things had been breaking badly for him. John Bancroft had sent him word that the decision had been made for the railroad to run by way of Bigg's Bend. That would have suited him fine a month ago, since he had expected the Box S and adjoining land to come into his possession, but he was convinced now that he would not get the property as long as the Sloans were alive. All his troubles he could lay at their door. He ought to have rubbed them out long ago, and would have if the men he had employed had not been so incompetent. Shonsey — Duff — LePage. All of them had failed him.

Anse paced the floor impatiently. He ought to be hearing from LePage and Crane soon. Surely the news ought to be good this time. It was not a difficult thing to shoot a man in the back or from ambush. With Randy disposed of it would not be so hard to get Sumner. His anger would make him reckless.

LePage and Crane rode into town after dusk and left their mounts at a livery stable. They ate supper at Jim Wong's restaurant, both of them in a vile mood. Crane's wrist was still painful and he flatly refused to go with LePage to report their lack of success.

"The old man will be ugly as a wounded bear when I tell him," LePage said sourly. "Sore too that we stopped yesterday at Buck's."

"Let him do his own dirty work then," Crane growled. He added angrily, "If that bartender hadn't butted in I would of got Sloan certain. And with my wrist I had to lay off a day coming back."

The account that Page gave his employer was a doctored one. According to his story Randolph Sloan had three men with him at Pete's Palace when they met and the town marshal had interrupted the shooting. That officer had ordered him and Hod Crane out of Chrysolite and it seemed wise of them to leave in order to avoid publicity. He had other disquieting news. Randy Sloan had accused him of having killed Joe Tubbs for three hundred dollars put up by Anse. Of course Homer Bascom had told them. They probably had him holed up at the Box S ranch.

"Bascom could not have talked unless you had blabbed to him," Anse snarled, anger flaring into his face. "You're no good. Not worth the powder to blow you up. A man can't trust you far as he could throw a two-year-old by the tail. I'd ought to shoot you into a rag doll. I've a mind to do it." His hand was in an open drawer, hovering close to the butt of a revolver.

LePage backed to the door, his gun out. "Don't try it, you double-crossing old scoundrel. I'll blow you off the map."

Anse knew he had gone too far. He took his hand out of the drawer and lifted it in the peace sign. "Hold on, Clint," he said. "I don't mean what I told you. After all, we're friends. But you'll admit I got some right to be sore. You get drunk and shoot off your mouth. Come back here and we'll talk this over. I'm going to get the Sloans sure as God made little apples."

LePage went back into the room, still scowling, suspicion in his mind. But since he wanted to get the Sloans as much as Anse did he had to play along with the old man.

Anse found a bottle and two glasses. They sat down at the table, their heads close together, and Anse talked. There would not be any slip-up this time. And they had to move fast on account of the jam Clint was in if Bascom lived and was a witness against him. They would ride out to the Box S after dark and wipe out the whole caboodle. Cully Ducret would be with them. It had always been his idea to clean out the Sloans in one big open fight. Sheriff Walsh would deputize them to bring in Sumner and Randy for examination about the killing of Dan Duff. Even if the men at the Box S were captured they would never reach town alive. *Killed while attempting to escape* was still a good alibi. If some of their crowd showed signs of being squeamish Anse would send them to town ahead of them. Young Hugh Pressman was staying at the ranch now. Unless it was necessary neither he nor Tim Jolly need be killed. That would depend on how the breaks came. But the two Sloans, Morgan Vance, and Homer Bascom had to be got rid of certain. Anse ticked off the men he would send on the posse, a dozen in all. Ducret would be in charge of the group. With him would ride LePage, Crane, the deputy Malvern, young Rog Appleton, who had been in the courthouse-square fight, and a wild nephew of Anse named Chris Cottrell. Of the others named two were old-timers known to have been in the Graham-Tewksbury feud, one was an outlaw from Texas, and the remaining three were tough characters ready to sell their pistols for pay to a high bidder.

"You don't aim to ride with us then," LePage jeered.

Anse equivocated. He wasn't sure about that. His rheumatism got so bad at times he could not fork a horse let alone ride as far as the Box S and back. But he sure would go if he was able.

"Maybe Ducret may not be able to ride with us either. He's liable to have the toothache or a sore toe." The lips of LePage curled in an ugly sneer. "He's choosy as hell."

"Ducret has been waiting to get a crack at the Sloans. This is his kind of a fight. He'll go."

"He'd better. If both of you pull out I'll be an absentee myself. Me, I don't aim to be yore cat's-paw any longer."

"Now — now, that's no way to talk, Clint. I paid you good money for all you ever did for me and I aim to pay you more. Once we are rid of the Sloans everything will be nice. Long as they are alive all of us are in danger. Remember what they did to Dan. They'll get you too, sure as Christmas — unless we make a clean-up first."

"When do you reckon on going?" LePage asked.

"Soon as we can gather the boys. Say in two hours. We'll get busy right away."

"Sure yore rheumatism will let you get around to see them?" LePage wanted to know with heavy sarcasm. Before Cottrell could answer he mentioned another point. "Maybe Randy and Morg ain't back yet."

"So much the better. We'll have fewer to fight. Later we'll lay for them as they come home."

That struck LePage as a good idea.

29

AS SOON AS the sheriff and Anse Cottrell had left her Anita Jelks began to tremble violently. She had given herself away. The bleak eyes in the old man's face back of the thin suave smile were still in her imagination watching her and condemning her. For a long time she did not move, fear crowding in on her. There was something dreadful about him, she thought, something not human. He looked like a swollen toad.

What was she to do? She could not go through this alone. She had to lean on somebody. Brad Webber had not been satisfied that one of the Sloan outfit had killed Duff. He had pointed out to the sheriff that Duff would not have lit the lamp if he had not been sure the man outside the window was a friend. Webber was a good man and his word had weight in the community. She decided to confide in him, even though he was president of the bank in which Anse Cottrell held a controlling interest.

She did not leave the house until after night had fallen. In the gathering darkness she sat close to a wall back of a wardrobe, terror rising in her, afraid to light a lamp as Duff had done. When she set out for Webber's it was by way of the back door and across a cow pasture.

The first words she spoke when Mrs. Webber showed her into the parlor were, "Draw down the blinds please."

Brad Webber did so. He could see she was in a highly nervous state. She held herself stiffly erect in a straight-backed chair, one hand clenched tightly around the doubled fist of the other.

"Something is troubling you, Anita," the banker said quietly. "Jane and I will help you if we can."

"Of course," Mrs. Webber said. "And I expect we can." She had gone to school with Anita thirty years earlier. They had always remained friendly.

"I'm going to be killed," Mrs. Jelks burst out, and began to sob.

She told her story, not coherently but in jets of words that had to be fitted into an understandable sequence. The Webbers were shocked. Jane did not at first believe it, though she had never liked or trusted Anse Cottrell. Anita had been so worked up she must have made a mistake. But Brad knew it was true. What Mrs. Jelks said fitted into a logical pattern of the crime. When she had gone to tell Cottrell that Dan Duff wanted to see a minister she had signed the man's death warrant, for Anse at once guessed he wanted to make a confession. This he had to stop at any cost. The detail that had puzzled Brad was now explained. Duff had lit the lamp because he thought he had nothing to fear from the man at the window calling to him.

Webber comforted the frightened woman. She had done right in coming to him. He would see that no harm came to her. The probabilities were that she was unduly alarmed and that Anse had no suspicion she had seen him, but it would be wise to take no chances. The first thing to do was to get her story down on paper. He would step over to Judge Simmons' house and bring him here.

Presently the judge was listening to the woman's story. He sat at a desk in the Webber parlor and took down Anita's evidence in her own words. She signed the statement and her signature was witnessed by Brad and his wife.

It was decided Anita had better stay at the Webber house for the present and keep out of sight. Nobody outside of themselves and the Webber maid need know she was here.

After Jane had taken their guest to her bedroom Judge Simmons told Brad of the Bascom confession. The two stories wove a web around Cottrell from which he would find it difficult to escape, though no doubt he would make a desperate effort to do so. If it could be done secretly it might be a good idea not to move directly against him yet but to arrest LePage and see if a confession could not be got out of him. Sufficiently frightened, the man might betray his employer to save himself. They had to reckon with the fact of course that Cottrell would become alarmed as soon as he learned Mrs. Jelks was missing. But they did not see what he could do about it if he did not know where she was.

Judge Simmons had risen to go when there came a knock on the door. Randy Sloan and Morg Vance had just reached town, dusty and travel-stained after an all-day ride from Chrysolite, and they had dropped in to tell Webber that the railroad would come to Round Top by way of Bigg's Bend. To the newly arrived pair the news the banker told them was even more important. Taken in connection with the confession of Bascom it would clear the Sloan faction of any suspicion of participation in the stage robberies and the murder of Dan Duff. When the followers of Anse Cottrell learned of his guilt all of them but his hired gunmen would draw away from him.

"His hired warriors too," Morg predicted. "Rats and a sinking ship."

"How about Cully Ducret?" Webber asked. "He's very loyal to Anse. Remember how he walked out into the street to join Anse the night the hoodlums were trying to lynch you boys."

"He's a strange character," Judge Simmons said. "Earlier that same night he faced Duff down and made him back water because the fellow had insulted Miss Hamilton. A man who was there told me Duff was forced to make an abject apology to her."

"It is hard to understand him," Randy agreed. "A professional gambler with the coldest manner I have ever met, a man ready to kill at the drop of a hat, yet one who lives rigidly by some queer code of his own. I doubt if he ever shot a man except in a fair fight."

"He has always been very courteous to me," the judge mentioned. "I think I'll tell him what we know of Anse."

Randy agreed that it would be well to arrest LePage and hold him a prisoner privately. Morg told of what had occurred at Chrysolite and his softness when faced with a showdown at Pete's Palace.

"If he figures he can save his own neck he'll squeal," he said.

"We'll pick him up for you if you like," Randy offered.

Judge Simmons felt it would be better not to have any of the opposite faction connected with the arrest. Since they could not trust Sheriff Walsh not to run to Cottrell they had better work through the district attorney, a young fellow named Richard Powell who could be depended upon to do his duty.

Randy was worried about Mrs. Jelks. She ought to be protected. It would not be safe for her to stay at her home. They could take care of her at the Box S.

Without giving any information as to where she was Webber told him that she was being looked after.

Randy Sloan walked out into the night with a lightness of heart he had not known for many a day. He saw ahead of him not only financial independence but the prospect of peace following the defeat of an enemy who had destroyed almost his whole family and nearly made him an outcast. He had never been a mousy man nor one who followed humdrum ways and put an undue value on money. When the prospect looked worst he had carried himself with an air of jaunty defiance. Now he knew that the day when Anse Cottrell ruled the district was over. The man was beaten, even though he might drag down others with him in his fall.

Randy had trod a long dangerous path alone, but in this hour of surging satisfaction he wanted a woman to share the victory with him. There was a light in Nora Hamilton's window and it was a magnet that drew him powerfully. A woman who had been dragged in mire and come through it fine and strong and clean was waiting there — waiting perhaps for him.

He turned to Vance, and his voice was warm and gay. "You won't like this, Morg, but I'm going in to see my girl — and you are going to sit on the step outside and wait for me."

To his surprise Morg made no objection. He looked into Randy's shining eyes and thought of his own youth, the days when the world had swum in an enchanted light.

"I'll put a rider on yore proposition," Morg said. "You got plenty of gravel in yore gizzard when you're spittin' in the eye of a trigger-happy bad man, but when it comes to handling a soft li'l thing in petticoats you ain't one-two-three. You gimme a guarantee to kiss that girl good and I'll let you have just ten minutes."

"It's a deal," Randy told him. "Don't you cut that ten minutes short."

Nora opened to Randy's knock. At sight of him her breasts rose and fell in a long deep breath of relief. Her glad eyes left the young man's face to say, "Won't you come in, Mr. Vance?"

Randy answered for him. "No, Morg wants a breath of fresh air." He shut the door behind him and took her in his arms.

A happy excitement drummed in her. She had never been sure of him. It did not seem in reason that he could care for her when Julia was in the picture. She had hoped — and despaired. But it was enough now to look into his eyes to know this was not play. She gave him lips eager and passionate, joy overflowing in her because of his masculine hunger for her.

It was five minutes later that she said, "I've been sitting here terribly afraid."

"Afraid of what?" he asked.

"For you. Half an hour ago a lot of armed men rode down the street and out of town. I saw them through the window. They were travelling quietly, none of them talking. That man LePage was one of them."

She could feel his body stiffen. "Heading for the Box S," he said, the certainty of this drenching him with fear.

He put her swiftly out of his arms. "I'll have to hurry."

Nora did not ask him what he meant to do. She knew he was going to warn his friends. His face had grown harsh and set. Love was banished from his mind. He flung open the door.

Morg was sitting on the step. He turned to say, "Time's not up yet."

"A Cottrell gang is on the way to attack the ranch," Randy explained. "We'll have to take the short cut." He started running for the live oaks where they had tied their mounts, not even stopping to say good-bye to Nora.

He has forgotten I exist, she thought. *For a man like Randy a woman can never be sure of being first long. But he's all I want in the world.*

Though their mounts had traveled far that day, they could not spare them. Already they might be too late. Not a moment could be wasted. They held the horses to a canter until they struck the hills where the cutoff started. The animals were breathing heavily when Morg pulled his to a walk.

"They'll never make it if we don't favor them some," he predicted.

Randy knew this was true. He drew up and let the ponies take the slope slowly, fretting at the delay.

"We'll be in time," Morg said. "Those fellows ain't bustin' a trace to reach the Box S. No point in their getting there till after our boys have gone to sleep. They got the whole night before them. When they get near the house they will leave their broncs and go afoot so as not to be heard and whoever is bossing the outfit will have to spot his men in the yard where they can find cover. If it is Walsh he'll move mighty slow and careful."

"It won't be Walsh. He isn't thorough enough for what Old Anse wants done tonight. If we don't get there before they do the boys won't have any warning."

Morg gave no sign of sharing Sloan's anxiety. He chewed tobacco composedly as they followed a cow trail that wandered over a hill dotted with sahuaros and dropped down from the ridge to an arroyo opening into a grove of live oaks festooned with moss and mistletoe.

"What do we do if we meet the gents coming up to the house — ride hell for leather into them and get shot full of holes?" the old-timer asked. He did not need to mention that he and Randy carried only revolvers and at least half of the attackers would be equipped with rifles. In open warfare they would both be shot from their saddles before they got within range.

"That would be what Anse would like, for us to ram in and get our clocks stopped," Randy answered. "We'll have to wait and see how the breaks come."

They came down through a crease in the hills to the rolling ground above the Box S spread. Darkness covered the plain. In front of them and lower down lay the huddle of buildings that formed the steading. None of them were visible now. Outside of the faint night noises, the soft scurrying of small wild desert life, no break in the quiet could be heard.

"Peaceful as a Sabbath morning in a Quaker village," Randy said ironically.

"Nice," agreed Morg dryly. "If we was sure the devil isn't cookin' a pot that's liable to boil over *pronto*." He fell into reminiscence, as he was likely to do at any time. "Onct when I was a young lad full of vinegar I went gallin' on a night like this, warm and kinda velvety, me in my Sunday-go-to-meeting duds. She was pretty as a high-steppin' young colt, and I was fixing up a nice line of talk for her, when wham, a rifle coughed and a bullet tore a hunk out of my saddle. It was her old man welcoming me. I sure went sailin' for anywheres but there."

Randy's mind was on the present. "Nothing has started yet anyhow, but that doesn't mean it won't."

In the black gulf of space below an army could have hidden. As they rode down into it the darkness became less solid. Objects not far away could be seen. Masses of vegetation appeared in the gloom, at first vaguely and as they drew closer more distinctly, to take form as greasewood and mesquite. A crescent moon came out from above drifting clouds and a few stars pricked the sky.

They opened a gate of wire strands and closed it behind them. The lie of land here was familiar as the palms of their hands. This was what they called the home pasture. Spare mounts that might be needed soon and cattle cut out for any reason were held here.

Out of the brush something crashed noisily, startling the riders. It was a deer, roused from sleep by the sound of the moving horses, and it went over the wired fence with winged feet.

"Mr. Buck was sure hittin' his heels," Morg said. "Had me plumb scared for a moment."

They were making for a grove of cottonwoods that fringed the river and ran up toward the house. More than once they stopped to listen for the sound of objects stirring. There were halfway across the pasture when a rumor of movement drifted to them on the light night breeze. It might be cattle, a little restless and not yet settled for sleep.

"Comes from the road," Randy said. "Not far away."

A horse neighed. Someone called sourly, "Keep that damned bronc still."

The dim shape of mounted men came over the hill, a ghostly cavalcade of figures silhouetted on the summit. They drew up there. After a short consultation one rode up to the fence. He was near enough for those inside the pasture to see him go through the motions of rolling a cigarette. By the flare of the match they recognized the man. He was Clint LePage.

A voice with a bite to it ordered the man to put out the cigarette.

LePage complained but obeyed. "Hell, we can't even see the house yet."

He had been sent forward to decide whether they had better cut the wires and go through the pasture or stick to the road. He called back, "Might as well stay on the road."

The Cottrell men disappeared down the slope. Morg and Randy traveled fast over the rolling ground and presently caught sight of the raiders again.

Below them lay the dark huddle of buildings, no light in the house. Men who rise to eat breakfast and go to work before the break of day retire to their bunks early. No doubt those at the ranch were sound asleep. It was time to raise an alarm. Randy and the puncher each fired twice into the sky and galloped for the cottonwoods.

To discover that other night riders were out was a shocking surprise to the invaders. Excited voices shouted back and forth conflicting suggestions. Shots crashed one into another. A bullet from a rifle fired at random whistled past Morg.

"We've stirred up a hornets' nest certain," Vance called as he slipped out of the saddle among the cottonwoods. "Unless the boys are all deef they must be awake now."

The attackers were also now afoot. They came down the road bunched and then scattered to find cover. This situation was not the one they had expected. The intention had been to slip up silently, hammer down the door, and break into the house before those inside were fully aroused from sleep. They had lost the advantage of surprise and were in the open with the defenders behind walls.

Already the raiders were pouring a concentrated fire on the house. Flashes stabbed the darkness. The tinkling of broken glass told Randy that a window had been shattered. The guns inside were hammering an answer. A man crouched back of a wagon in the yard cried out that he was hit. For the next few minutes whenever the guns were stilled he could be heard groaning.

A fellow hunkered behind a horse rake did not like his exposed position and made a bolt for the nearest cottonwood. Almost at the same moment Morg and Randy slammed their bullets at him. He jerked to a standstill, whirled, and ran limping back to the horse rake.

"Let's get out of here," a frightened voice yelped. "We'll all be knocked off if we don't."

"Stay where you are, you rabbit," another ordered. "We came to arrest four men and I mean to get them."

Randy guessed the second speaker was Ducret. His words carried the Texas drawl. The man was standing at the corner of the root house near the far end of the yard. Though Randy knew the distance was too far for accuracy, he pumped a shot at him.

The intermittent drumming of the guns racketed across the yard. Owing to the meager light most of the firing was hit or miss and the casualties were fewer than they would have been in the daytime. The firing died down for a time and the faint moaning of the man behind the wagon could be heard. Several of the raiders were inching back from their places. Randy wondered if they were giving up the fight. They faded into the darkness. The gunfire picked up volume again.

"Look out, Randy," Morg shouted. "They're aimin' to rush us."

The men who had withdrawn had circled around and were moving toward the grove, clinging to what cover there was. Randy and his companion shifted their positions to get behind larger trees. They could not make a run for the house without coming under the fire of both parties.

Morg dropped a shot in front of one of the advancing men. There were three of them and they were moving in from different directions toward the grove. One would make a short rush forward and drop to the ground, then another would do the same, the prone ones firing to protect him.

Randy could not remember whether he had one or two loaded shells left in the cylinder of his .45. "We'd better wait till they are close," he said.

Others in the yard were directing their fire toward them. This cross discharge stopped as their companions drew nearer the cottonwoods. One of the men, a short fellow carrying a rifle, chanced to be heading straight for Randy. When he was twenty feet distant Randy fired and missed. He pulled the trigger of his revolver again and the hammer fell on an empty cylinder.

The squat man took the last few yards with a rush. He overran the mark, trying to stop himself too late. Before he had recovered balance Randy pistol-whipped him with the long barrel of his weapon. It struck the man on the side of the head. He teetered on his high-heeled boots trying to keep from falling. Randy struck again and the man sagged to the ground. Sloan tore the rifle from his lax fingers and turned to help Morg.

The old-timer needed no help at the moment. One of the three who had charged the grove had disappeared, the other was racing away. His .44 lay on the ground where he had dropped it. A lucky slug from Morg's weapon had ripped through his hand.

"Where is the other man?" Randy asked.

"Back of a tree at the yonder end of the grove. He's sticking pretty close to cover so far." Morg looked down at the prone figure. "Dead?" he asked.

"Sleeping. I had luck and slammed him one on the head."

The general firing was heavy again. With an eye on the unconscious man Randy sat down back of the tree and reloaded the empty revolver. He holstered it and picked up the rifle, checking it to make sure there were cartridges in the chamber. The moon had gone under a cloud again for a few minutes. When it reappeared Morg let out a small cry.

"By Judas Priest. Looky there, boy." He was pointing to a man who lay on the ground face down, his arms and legs spread-eagled. A shot from the house had killed him.

The booming of the guns had ceased. So had the moaning of the wounded man by the wagon.

A cowhand in chaps cried, "Bill's dead."

Through the raiders raced a panic cold as a wintry wind. An urge crowded in on them to get away before any more of them were hit. They knew the attack had bogged down and none of them but Ducret had any heart for continuing it. They fell back in disorder, each intent on saving himself, stampeding for their mounts over the hill. If they heard the Texan's shouts to come back they paid no heed to them.

Ducret stood alone in the yard, facing the enemy. He backed slowly away, stopping twice to fling another bullet at the house. The man was out of range for Morg and Randy did not raise his rifle. The Texan's cool intrepid nerve stirred in Randy a reluctant admiration. It looked as though Ducret expected to be killed but would not give his enemies the satisfaction of seeing him run. He was the target for several gunmen. Their bullets whistled past him before one tore into his arm.

Sumner shouted an order to him. "Throw down that Winchester and surrender."

Ducret did not answer in words. He shifted the rifle to his left side, managed to raise it high as his hip, sent a slug through a window, then turned and walked away. He neither hurried nor looked back. Not another gun sounded. The Box S men watched him disappear over the brow of the hill.

The defenders crowded through the doorway into the yard. All of the wounded men had got away with the exception of the one Randy had slapped down with his .45, a bar fly LePage had persuaded to join the posse. They found two dead. The one lying face down was a notorious bad man from Texas. Chris Cottrell was the other. His body lay slumped against a wagon wheel. Shot early in the battle, he had died within the last minute or two.

Hard-eyed and grim, Sumner looked down at the boyish face of young Cottrell. "His mother can thank Old Anse for this," he said. "What else could we do? There will be war long as that old devil lives. It never was worse even in the old days."

Randy differed. "I think this is the old man's last big play. He has let himself get trapped. A witness saw him kill Dan Duff. His men won't fight for him any longer when they learn that."

"What witness?" Tim Jolly asked.

That was a question Randy thought it better not to answer. There were too many present. A careless word might spread the name until it reached Anse. He said, "Tell you all about it later. We had better put the bodies on the porch and cover them. Somebody will have to ride to town and tell the sheriff to come and get them."

Sumner vetoed the last suggestion. "A messenger would likely be killed before he got out of town. Walsh does not need one of us to tell him. He'll hear it soon as the first of these disappointed warriors hits Round Top."

"Sure," Morg assented. "Inside of half an hour the whole town will buzz like a hive of bees. Doc Jones will be the busiest guy in seven counties tonight. Quite a passel of damaged heroes will be crowding his office for repairs."

Tim Jolly covered the body of Chris Cottrell with a sheet. He was sobered by the swiftness with which death had struck. It might so easily have been he lying there except for some unexpected hitch in the plan of the raiders. "We sure had luck," he said. "Every window in the house smashed and not one of us hurt. They must have poured fifty bullets at us. Seems a miracle they did not score a hit."

"They couldn't get at us," Sumner answered. "What saved us was finding out in time they were coming." He turned to his brother. "How come that?"

Randy told of hearing a band of armed men had left town, of the hurried ride home by way of the short cut, and of the flurry of shots they had started to warn those in the house. While Bascom washed and tied a bandage around the bleeding head of the heavy-set prisoner Randy covered the developments of the past four days, omitting the name of Mrs. Jelks from the story.

They flung questions at the captured man, a loafer named Jule Pilkington. The man was badly frightened. He was not sure they would not in their anger kill him and to propitiate them he told all he knew about the organization of the raiders. Sheriff Walsh had sent them out but with a good deal of reluctance. Anse Cottrell had been very active and put pressure on Walsh. The leader of the posse was Ducret, but there was a faction headed by LePage who had carried on a whispering campaign to rub out the Box S group rather than to bring them to town as prisoners. It was Jule's opinion that Ducret knew nothing about this, though the whole party felt that he intended to kill Sumner in the fight.

In discussion later Sumner disagreed with the decision made at Brad Webber's house to let the prosecuting attorney arrange the capture of LePage. It was up to the Sloans to take care of that. Young Powell had no experience in man-hunting and with the best intentions he might fail. One point that stood out like a sore thumb was that the fellow had to be locked up and put in fear. Under pressure he would probably break and with him as a witness for the prosecution Anse would not have a chance.

Randy was of the same opinion. The fellow was too dangerous to be allowed to run free. They had either to arrest or kill him and under the circumstances it was better to bring him in alive.

"We had better ride out to his ranch tomorrow," Tim said.

"Sure, but you won't find him there," Morg replied. "He'll be sticking close to town where Anse and his crowd can protect him. Clint knows what he would do if he were in our place, so he figures we will do that too if we can — lie in the brush and shoot him when he comes out of his cabin in the morning."

"Therefore he won't be there." Randy nodded. "Sounds reasonable, but we'll run up and make sure."

The Sloans rode up to the LePage place next morning.

His log cabin nestled against a hillside on the edge of a small valley which was the center of a homestead claim so tiptilted that all of it except about five acres was too rough for cultivation. Since LePage raised nothing but a patch of lettuce the size of a tablecloth this did not worry him. He made a living from other men's cattle and crimes more serious.

In a mountain corral the brothers found half a dozen calves bawling piteously for water. They set the windmill pumping and after the animals had drunk opened the gate to free them.

LePage was not at home and apparently had not been for more than twenty-four hours. In an angle between the roof and the supporting crosspiece they found a bit of cloth with eyeholes cut in it. Evidently this had been used as a mask.

30

THE SLOAN BROTHERS tied in front of Asa Stump's store and stepped to the sidewalk. Matt Chunn was sitting in a tiptilted chair with the back resting against the wall. He had picked the coolest spot he could find.

"It's sure a sizzler," Randy remarked, wiping the perspiration from his face.

"Yes, it is," the old man agreed. "They claim three hogs walked down Main Street half an hour ago and when last heard of they had turned to three buckets of lard. Maybe this is a windy. I ain't seen the evidence personally."

"How is your health, Matt?"

"Jes' tobable. I got so I cain't eat but about three eggs and a stack of flapjacks for breakfast. I hear you boys have been raisin' hell again."

Randy shook his head. "You must be thinking of somebody else."

"Hmp! A lot of nice young fellows rode out to pay a call at the Box S and Doc Jones' business has improved a hundred per cent, not to mention that of Bill Brackett the undertaker." The old-timer's voice grew high and shrill. "Haven't you two got a lick of sense? There's scalawags in this town would bump you off for a dollar Mex."

"Not in the daytime," Sumner told him scornfully. His contempt was not for Chunn. He had not forgotten how the old fellow had flung aside his eighty-odd years and stood in the gateway of the corral to fling defiance at Dan Duff the night of the attempted lynching. "The gun slingers of Cottrell like to work in the night."

The younger brother asked a question in a low voice. "Do you know whether Clint LePage is in town, Matt?"

"He's in town but not in what you might call general circulation. I've heard tell he is at the Empire saloon where two-three of his cronies always hang out. You aimin' to start something?"

Randy's innocent gaze reproached him. "Peaceable citizens such as us?"

The Sloans walked into the store. Except Stump they found nobody there but a woman buying groceries. They waited until she had gone before taking up the subject on their minds. From his pocket Sumner took a piece of gray cloth with two holes in it and strings fastened to to both sides.

"Ever see a piece of goods like this, Asa?" he asked.

Stump looked it over carefully, feeling the texture with his fingers. "I think so." He went to a shelf and took down a bolt of cloth that lay under several others. He compared the two. "Same stuff," he decided.

"You wouldn't remember who bought any of this," Randy suggested.

The storekeeper dug into his memory. "Seems to me

Miss Hamilton got some to make a waist for a customer."

"Anybody else?"

Stump scratched his head and light came to him. "Clint LePage bought a half a yard. It must have been most two years ago. Said he wanted to patch his pants with it." The storekeeper looked up inquiringly. "This looks as if it might have been used for a mask."

"It does, doesn't it?" Sumner replied dryly. "We're going to leave this here with you, Asa. We want you to put it in your safe where it won't get lost. This is important."

"I'll put it in now," Stump said, and he did so. He was a man who knew how to curb his curiosity.

The Sloans rode to a livery stable on the street back of the courthouse square. They left their mounts there after they had the owner saddle a third horse for them. "Somebody may be riding back with us," Sumner explained.

From the livery stable they walked across a vacant lot to the back door of the Empire. At this early hour the place was deserted except for the bartender and three men playing stud.

One of the players glanced up casually as they entered, dropped his cards on the table, and rose to his feet. He said in a low voice, "Look out." He was one of the Texans who had been with the last posse that had gone to the Box S, by name Warren Greer.

The startled eyes of LePage lifted to the Sloans. He started to get up.

Randy said, "No hurry, Clint. Finish the hand."

The third man was Hod Crane. A bandage was tied around his right wrist. He demanded in a surly tone, "What you want?"

"Nothing from you." Sumner answered. "We're going for a ride with LePage."

Greer asked, "Where you taking him?"

"Are you declaring yourself in?" Randy asked the Texan. Neither he nor his brother had drawn a revolver, but their eyes were chill and hard. They were gray-blue eyes, level, direct, unfearing, more potent than a deadly weapon in the hands of a weak man, eyes that flung no flag of flurry, were tremendously sure of themselves.

In the phrase of the West, Greer had no chips in this game. Though he made no physical movement, they could see him drawing back.

"I only asked a question," he said.

"If you're not keen to play the hand out we'll beat it, Clint," Randy said.

"I ain't going anywhere. I'm staying here." The face of the man had turned gray. He believed they meant to take him to his death. "You can't do this to me," he cried out bitterly.

"You're riding with us," Sumner corrected. "We're going to hold you safe till your trial."

"You got no right to do this," Hod Crane objected. "Clint doesn't have to go. What trial you talkin' about?"

"He is coming with us dead or alive," Sumner differed. "He'll do no more dry-gulching until after his trial for the murder of Joe Tubbs."

"They're aiming to shoot me down soon as they have got me alone," LePage bleated.

"You got a warrant for him?" Crane asked.

Sumner patted the revolver at his side. "Issued by Judge Colt."

LePage felt a dreadful fear crawling up his spine. His hand was within six inches of the .45 resting on his hip. He was being offered a choice. But he knew he could not flog his fainting will to draw.

"Boys," he pleaded in a hoarse voice, "I didn't kill Joe. He was a neighbor of mine. You got me wrong. I'll swear it on a stack of Bibles."

"Tell that to the jury," Randy said. "Last call, Clint. Get up on your feet and come this way."

It was a showdown. LePage had to give up or fight. He rose on legs grown weak, his body sagging, and moved slowly forward.

"No objections, I hope," Sumner inquired, a grim thin smile on his lips as he faced the other two.

They made no answer. Crane shrugged his shoulders. If LePage did not have the sand to stand up to these men it was no business of his.

The Sloans went out of the back door with their prisoner. They flanked him as they moved across the vacant lot to the livery stable and when they rode out of town one was on each side of him.

The party did not head for the Box S ranch house but for a deserted miner's cabin far up in the hills. LePage begged for his life. After a time it seeped into his mind that if he told all he knew no summary vengeance would be executed on him. He began to talk, laying all the blame on Anse Cottrell for his misdeeds. The Sloans put him at a rickety table with ink and a pen in front of him.

Jogged by constant reminders of his peril, he wrote out a full confession.

After dark Tim Jolly rode to town with a note from Randy to Brad Webber, who in turn took it to Richard Powell. Guided by Tim Jolly, the district attorney and a friend of his left at once on horseback for the cabin.

It was apparent to Powell that the Box S men had made preparation for occupying the cabin before picking up their prisoner. The prospector had left a rotting table and two homemade stools in the cabin, but the Sloans had brought from the ranch bedrolls and an ample supply of food. Within fifteen minutes of the time that Powell and his friend swung stiffly from their mounts they were enjoying a good supper and hot coffee at a campfire.

When asked to sign the confession, LePage showed the stubbornness of fear. The only terms upon which he would write his name to it were that Powell would take him back to town and turn him over to Sheriff Walsh. The district attorney approved of this and the Sloans reluctantly agreed. Now that it was signed before witnesses the confession would stand. It implicated Cottrell in the stage robberies and the murder of Tubbs. Probably it was better LePage should be held legally rather than by those known to be enemies of his.

The Sloans rode to Round Top with Powell and the prisoner to forestall any attempt at rescue there might be when they reached town. By avoiding main streets they reached the jail without attracting attention. Sheriff Walsh met them at the door. He was both surprised and annoyed. If Powell wanted LePage arrested he should have called on him to do it, he complained. That was what he was paid for. While he was still grumbling about it old Buck Myers hobbled past on the other side of the street. He pricked up his ears at this nice tidbit of news.

It was a rare bit of gossip for Buck. He dropped into the nearest saloon and spread the word that Clint LePage had been arrested for the murder of Joe Tubbs.

When Anse Cottrell drove in next morning from a visit to his ranch the news that LePage was a prisoner slapped him in the face.

31

TO COTTRELL this was an appalling bit of bad luck. He knew LePage inside out. The fellow was chicken-hearted and would rat, hoping to save himself. More than once Anse had swithered in doubt about trusting the man. But that was water under the bridge. He had to find a way out of this horrible dilemma and move fast.

First, LePage must be got out of jail. After that he could take steps to get rid of the man. No use going to Powell about it. The Sloans had evidently already got at him. He must make use of Walsh, though he knew the sheriff would be reluctant to help him. Fortunately he had that crooked courthouse deal to hang over his head.

So far as he could see there was only one way to pull this off and LePage was such a blunderer he might boggle that. He took down the revolver hanging on the wall and loaded it. This he hung from a scabbard fastened under his arm. It was quite possible that one of the bullets in the chamber would kill an innocent man before night but he could not afford to worry about that.

He walked to the courthouse and into the office of the sheriff, closing the door behind him. Walsh was in no complacent humor. Rumors were flying around that Cottrell might soon be involved in serious trouble and if so it would not do a man any good to be a partisan of his.

"This spite arrest of Clint is an outrageous move of the Sloans," Anse said by way of an opening. "I'm surprised Powell would lend himself to it."

"He thinks he has got the goods on LePage," the sheriff said morosely. "It wouldn't surprise me."

"I hope Clint did not do such an evil thing as to kill Tubbs." Anse shook his head in virtuous sorrow. "If he did I can't stand back of him. But I must be sure. I want to talk with him. Write a line to Malvern, Pete, telling him to let me in for a talk with Clint."

"Powell told me not to let anybody see him," Walsh explained. "Sorry, Anse."

"You are the sheriff, Pete. Powell can't give orders to you about your prisoners. Why shouldn't I talk with Clint? What harm can it do?"

"Don't know as it can do any harm, but——"

Anse interrupted him sharply. "You are under no obligations to Powell but you certainly are to me. I put you on the ticket and I covered up for you on that courthouse deal. This is a little thing I am asking, Pete."

Walsh could have told him that he had asked a good many favors not so little, but in this matter it did not seem worth while. He pulled a pad of paper to him and wrote a permit to visit LePage.

On his way to the jail Anse saw Judge Simmons walk into the Texas House. Since the judge was a church member and opposed to an open town this surprised him, though Cottrell did not give it much thought. Probably there was somebody there he wanted to see.

The prisoner was lying on a cot when his visitor was shown into the cell. Anse said cheerfully, "Sorry you are in this little jam, Clint, but I reckon I can get you out of it all right."

"About time you got here," LePage growled.

"I was out of town last night and didn't hear about your trouble until an hour ago. I came soon as I could get a pass from Pete."

"Did he give you a pass to let me out?" LePage asked with sullen bitterness.

Malvern had departed, telling them they had ten minutes.

"No, but I've brought the pass with me." Cottrell looked around to make sure the jailor was not in sight. He hurriedly passed the revolver to LePage.

"Loaded?"

Anse nodded. "Don't use it unless you are forced to. Bluff your way out if you can. When he brings you supper, say."

"Yeah, that would be the best time. How about a horse?"

"I'll have one waiting for you in the live oak grove.

You'll need money. I'll be there with three hundred dollars."

"Better give it to me now."

"I haven't it with me, but I won't fail you."

"I feel sure you won't," LePage jeered. "You wouldn't like to hang any more than I would."

"You have not told Powell anything — done any talking that would get us in trouble?"

LePage looked him in the face and lied. "Not a word. Do you reckon I would throw down a good pal?"

"I'm sure you wouldn't. One of these days we'll meet and have a good laugh at the way we fooled Powell and his friends the Sloans."

"Y'betcha. I'll head for the line. Wish I could get a crack at that Randy Sloan before I go."

"You've had bad luck with him. If you had another chance you would get him."

They smiled in pretended good-fellowship, each in his heart exulting in his betrayal of the other, a man he was sending to his death. Crime had tied them together in a bond both hated. Now they were paying mercilessly the grudge long cherished.

The sound of Malvern coming along the passage reached them. Cottrell put a comforting hand on the prisoner's shoulder.

"Be bold and tonight you'll sleep in peace, Clint," he said.

LePage missed the hidden irony of the promise.

32

THOUGH Judge Jefferson Simmons never patronized gambling houses or saloons for pleasure, he was a Westerner and understood that these establishments were the clubs of the frontier. Men met in them for both social and business purposes. So when he walked that day about noon into the Texas House neither the bartender nor the proprietor was much surprised. The judge nodded to them and strolled across the floor to the faro table.

Ducret was leaning back in the lookout's chair smoking a cigar. He was the dealer, but because his wounded arm was in a sling he had changed places for the present with his helper. Since the day was still too young for the gamblers the game had not yet started.

Through a thin spiral of rising smoke the Texan's narrowed eyes watched the approach of the judge. His catlike stillness suggested an indolence that was deceptive. He could move with incredible swiftness when the call came.

After a stiff "Good morning, Mr. Ducret," the judge came at once to his reason for being there.

"There is a very important matter I would like to talk over with you, sir," he said in a low voice.

Ducret took the cigar from his mouth, held it poised, and looked directly at the judge. Their contacts had been limited to formal greetings as they passed on the street. The faro dealer could not guess what interest they had in common, but Jefferson Simmons was a dignified citizen, reserved in manner, not one likely to push himself into the affairs of another.

"I am listening," Ducret said.

"Not here," the judge told him. "This is a secret and dangerous matter."

The Texan made a suggestion after consideration. "Any place you say, Judge. I can drop around to your house when my shift is over if that is convenient for you."

"That will do very well." Simmons hesitated before giving a word of caution. "Please consider this confidential."

He bowed and left. Ducret's eyes followed him to the door. He wondered what was back of this. It was not a trap, he felt sure. Judge Simmons was a Southern gentleman, entirely honorable. Nor was he a fool. He was too much a man of the world to arrange a meeting for the purpose of lecturing him on his evil ways.

In the long summer evenings darkness fell late. Children were still playing one old cat when Ducret sauntered down the street to the house of the judge. Their voices came sharp and clear from the vacant lot they used. The heat of the day had not yet lifted, though a breeze from the hills was beginning to stir.

An old Negro with only a fringe of white hair opened the door for Ducret and let him into a room walled with bookshelves.

"The judge will be here shortly, sah," he told the visitor with the courtesy typical of so many of his race.

The Texan picked up a book from the table beside which he sat. It was a copy of *Kenilworth.* He opened the novel at random and was reading when the judge entered.

"You are an admirer of Scott perhaps," Simmons suggested after a word of greeting.

"When I was a boy I devoured all his novels and his long poems too," Ducret answered.

"In my opinion he is the greatest of them all," the judge said.

They discussed his work for a few minutes, the realization in the minds of both that whatever came later it was a passing pleasure to have found a common enthusiasm.

The judge broke the ice. "I am not sure that I am doing right in approaching you on this matter, Mr. Ducret. If I have misread your character it may be a great mistake. I want to put some facts before you of which you are perhaps not aware. My reason is that a crisis is at hand and I do not want you to take a position without being fully informed."

"That is very good of you," Ducret told him ironically.

"You may feel this presumptuous. In the past you have been committed to the cause of Anse Cottrell, I understand."

"Consider me still so committed, sir," the Texan said coldly.

"Perhaps I had better get to the evidence I have to show you."

"As you wish." Ducret sat erect, stiffly resentful. Of late his doubts about Old Anse had been disturbing him but he did not care to hear any arguments from others on the subject.

The judge did not argue. He showed the Texan copies of the statements made by Homer Bascom and Anita Jelks, and after he had read these the confession of LePage.

If true the three papers showed damning evidence against Anse. Ducret had known Cottrell was violent and revengeful, but he was not prepared for the long catalogue of crimes set down in the confession of Clint LePage. Yet to the gambler the most unforgivable offense was the murder of Dan Duff. The man had been Cottrell's partner in evil, had fought on the same side with him throughout the feud, and to save Cottrell had been destroyed by him. It seemed to Ducret a callous betrayal of all decency.

"May I talk with Mrs. Jelks?" he asked.

Simmons could not promise that. "We are of the opinion that if Cottrell knew where she is he would try to murder her. That we must prevent. I suppose your point is that you want to hear this story from her own lips."

"That is right. I want to be sure."

"I'll see if it can be arranged."

The judge talked with Brad Webber and Mrs. Jelks. The woman said that she would trust Ducret. He had once done her a kindness. She was sure he would stand by his word.

An hour later he was listening to her story.

Though she now had powerful friends lined up to protect her, Anita Jelks was still very much afraid. Anse Cottrell loomed in her mind as a villain strong and ruthless. If word came to him that she was a danger to him he would destroy her. This fear ran through her whole story.

Ducret said, with an icy gentleness, "Don't be frightened, Mrs. Jelks. You'll never see him again alive."

He was a man with a bad record but one not wholly sold to evil. The revelation of Cottrell's treachery shocked him. He had been loyal to the man, excusing him because he knew that in blood feuds there was a pressure on a leader forcing him to be hard. It hurt his pride that he had allowed himself to be a tool. A cold hatred of the scoundrel was burning in him. The more he thought of it the greater was his anger.

33

LEPAGE was standing at the door of the cell when Malvern brought him his supper.

Before unlocking the door the jailor ordered him to go to the other end of the room and sit on the cot. He was not going to run the risk of having the prisoner attack him while the tray was in his hands.

"So you're scared of me," LePage sneered, and showed his yellow teeth in an ugly grin.

"I'm not scared of you," the jailor corrected. "But I wouldn't trust you any farther than I would a rattler. You stay put over there till I say, 'Come and get it.' I brought you a good steak and fried potatoes, kindness of Anse Cottrell. He said for you to enjoy yore supper."

As Malvern stooped to put the tray on a bench the prisoner jumped to his feet, a revolver in his hand. The jailor dropped the tray and reached for his weapon. His fingers closed on the butt of the .45. He never got it out of the holster. A bullet tore into his side. The spread fingers of the left hand clutched at his heart. Malvern's body began to slump as the hinges of the knees gave way. It sank slowly to the floor.

LePage flung another slug into the stomach. It was not needed. The man was already dead. The prisoner glared down at him wolfishly. "You would have it," he snarled, and made for the door. While he was still on the stairs he heard a key turning in the lock of the front door.

A voice he recognized as that of the sheriff cried, "Something wrong inside." Others took up the alarm. The trampling of hurried feet came to him, the sound of men racing down the street.

The front door was flung open and Sheriff Walsh stood in the entrance, a six-shooter in his hand. LePage fired from a crouch, moving backward to the rear door. Walsh slumped against the jamb, steadied himself, and pulled the trigger an instant before the escaping man disappeared into the alley.

LePage raced for the live oaks. Once he was in the saddle he would streak out of town and make for the border. He reached the trees, to meet a shocking disappointment. There was no horse there.

Back of a clump of brush he heard something moving. Past all reason now, he fired at the spot where the rustling had been. Anse Cottrell slipped out from the bush screen. The lead from his gun struck the fugitive in the hand. LePage stared at him in surprised horror for an instant, then turned and fled. A bullet whipped through the leaves over his head.

The one urgency that drove LePage was his need of a horse. Without one he was lost. If he could reach a saloon unnoticed he would find one at a hitch rack. To save himself he would have to skirt the danger zone around the courthouse square. It was getting dark and there was a chance he would not be recognized. But he had to hurry.

His zigzag run brought him to the rear of Stump's store. It was closed. He could hear men moving along the sidewalk. A voice yelped, "Where's the killer at?" Terror clawed at LePage's belly. The square was cut off from him. He had meant to slip between buildings to the street.

In that moment while he stood there, uncertain which way to turn, he became aware that his hunters were coming down the alley. He edged away from them, clinging close to the wall, but in front of him was no hope since the alley ran into the street. Passing a lighted window, he looked into the room. A woman was moving about setting the table for her supper.

He opened the door, stepped inside, and covered the woman with his gun, at the same time drawing the window curtain. The door he bolted.

Nora Hamilton opened her mouth to scream, but his snarling order stopped the sound. "Don't you," he warned.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I'm in a jam. First off, pull the curtain of the front window." He added harshly, "And lock the door."

Nora had heard the shooting, but drunken cowboys were always venting their high spirits by firing into the air. It had become a matter of course to pay no attention to it. But this man LePage was in another class. Randy Sloan had been with her not fifteen minutes earlier and had told her of the latest developments.

The fellow must have broken jail and been wounded in making his escape. He had snatched a handkerchief from his pocket and was trying with one hand to stop the bleeding from the palm of it. Fear stared out of his eyes. He waved the revolver jerkily. The man's panic made him doubly dangerous.

Nora pulled the curtain and moved to the door. Her body was between him and it. She turned the key halfway and then back, leaving the door unlocked.

"I'd better tie up that finger," she said quietly. Her heart was pounding fast, but she rode down her terror to keep it out of her voice.

He ripped out an oath of anger and self-pity. "That double-crossing sidewinder Cottrell was to have had a horse for me in the live oaks but he lay in wait to ambush me."

"I'll get a basin of water and a cloth," she told him.

"If you cry out or make a move to get away I'll plug you," he threatened savagely. "They aim to string me up if they get me. Let 'em know I'm here and I'll drill you certain."

"You're safe enough here till the hunt dies down," she soothed. "I'm not going to do anything foolish."

As she dipped water from a bucket into a pan and got a strip of white cloth for a bandage she thought, *I mustn't let him know how frightened I am. He is already half crazy.*

She washed the hand and bandaged it neatly. The man could hardly stand still to let her look after the wound. He was jerky with nervousness and his fear-filled eyes shuttled from one door to the other anxiously. They could hear the evidences of excitement outside —

the shuffling of feet, raised voices, doors slamming.

"Don't answer if anyone knocks," he warned.

"No," she promised. "You'll be safe here. But wouldn't it be better to surrender. They'll only put you back in jail."

"You talk like a fool," he growled. "I had to kill a man to get away. The lunkhead tried to stop me. It was self-defense. Yet they would croak me just the same."

She poured the bloodstained water from the pan into a slop pail and dropped into a wastebasket the remnants of cloth left from the strip.

"If you are hungry I can get you some food," she said.

"Fix me a sandwich and a cup of coffee." The man's closely set eyes shuttled round the room, suspicion blended with the frozen fear in them.

The stir in the street had lessened. Evidently the hunt had shifted to another area. But terror was still riding the man as he stood by the table eating wolfishly and gulping coffee.

A knock came at the front door. LePage's long body stiffened. He laid the cup down softly and his hand reached for the revolver. Out of the corner of his mouth he whispered, "Keep still." On tiptoe he softfooted back of the counter.

The rap on the panel came again. Nora looked at LePage, uncertain what to do. He shook his head.

The door opened and Randy Sloan walked in. LePage had ducked back of the counter. The dread in Nora's eyes told Randy that something was wrong. His glance fell on three drops of wet blood on the floor. They had not been there when he left. He saw coffee that had been slopped on the table from a half-filled cup. It jumped to his mind that LePage was in this room back of the counter. If either he or Nora made a false move the man would cut them down in their tracks.

Randy had come back to ease Nora's mind in case she was anxious about the disturbance. It had struck him as strange that she had not answered his knock. A murderous ruffian was on the loose, a fellow who had just killed one man and wounded another. It might be well for him to stay with her a while.

She said, "Did — you forget something?"

"I thought all this noise outside might disturb you."

"I — I hadn't noticed it." Her fear-filled eyes fluttered to the counter and back. They were a complete give-away.

He said lightly, "I dropped in to tell you not to worry about the shooting. That fellow LePage has broken jail. He is being hunted. No need for you to be afraid though. He daren't fire a gun for fear of betraying where he is. In escaping he killed Malvern and wounded Walsh. If they caught him he would be hanged at once. My opinion is that he has picked up a horse and is racing for the border."

Nora knew that his casual words were for the hunted man back of the counter as much as they were for her. The urge crowding her was to get Randy out of the house. She knew how close the killer was to panic. He might fire any moment, and his first shot would be at Sloan.

"Nice of you to tell me." Her voice trembled as she spoke. "But I am not afraid. I'll bolt both doors. You mustn't stay or folks will talk."

Randy laughed. "Come, come, you can't hand me my hat like that. You're my girl. You haven't forgotten that, have you?" His gaze fell to the drops of blood on the floor and rose to meet hers.

It told her he knew they were not alone. She had been almost sure from his first words that he had been aware of it. Her eyes begged him to go.

"I haven't forgotten anything, Randy," she said. "But we women have to keep up appearances. Please leave me now."

"I won't stay long," he promised. "But I haven't had any supper. You are just getting ready to eat. Fix a bite up for a tramp and give him a cup of coffee."

"You could go to Jim Wong's," she answered, though she had no hope that he would do so.

"Lady, I have never drunk your coffee and I'm going to find out how good it is." He tossed his hat on the sewing machine.

Drawing out a chair, he sat at the table facing the counter. Beneath the surface of his talk he was trying to work out a plan how he could capture LePage without endangering Nora. Probably the man would not surrender without a fight. His case was too desperate.

From back of the counter came a slight scuffling sound.

"You got a rat back there?" Randy asked. "If so, you ought to set a trap."

As Nora went into the kitchen for the coffee her worried eyes reproached him for his levity. The situation was so close to tragedy it terrorized her.

When she was out of the room Sloan slid his .45 from its holster and rested the arm that held it on the table. "You can come out of there with your hands up, Clint," he said quietly.

After a moment of tense silence the hidden man's head shot up. Without taking time to aim he fired. His second shot and Randy's first crashed at the same time. The arms and shoulders of LePage slumped to the counter. His forefinger twitched, but with not enough force to pull the trigger. Slowly the body slipped out of sight.

Randy moved fast. He was not sure that LePage was dead. But as soon as he saw him lying back of the counter huddled on the floor with arms outflung he knew there was no longer life in him. A small hole in the forehead showed where the bullet had struck.

Nora stood in the kitchen doorway, her face ashen. She put a hand against the jamb to help support her.

"Oh God!" she wailed softly. "I thought —— "

Randy knew what she had thought. He took her in his arms and held her tight. "It's all right," he told her. "That's the way it had to be."

Her legs were weak and her body trembling. She clung to him.

The front door opened and men came into the house hurriedly. One was Cully Ducret. The Texan looked down at the body.

"You killed him?" he said to Randy.

"He had the first shot," Sloan replied. "I told him to hold up his hands. He didn't want it that way. You'll find his two bullets in the wall there."

Ducret stooped and picked up the gun. "Five shots fired," he said after checking. "Somebody must have got this gun to him." Surprise jumped to his voice. "It's Anse Cottrell's .45. How come LePage with it?"

That reminded Nora of what the hunted man had told her. "Mr. Cottrell was helping him, at least he thought so. He had promised to have a horse for him at the Live Oak grove but he was waiting there hidden and wounded him when he showed up."

"Who told you that?" Ducret demanded, a terrible look in his eyes.

She looked down at the dead man. "He did, while I was bandaging his wound."

When Ducret spoke it was not so much to them as to himself. "Anse gave him a pistol so that he could kill another man if he had to, then waited in the brush to murder him to keep him from talking. First Duff, now LePage." His concluding words were a murmur so low Sloan just caught them. "He has lived too long."

Men poured into the room, among them Richard Powell and Brad Webber. The sheriff's wound was a flesh one, but for the present he was incapacitated. The prosecuting attorney, after a short talk with the banker and Randy Sloan, decided to have Anse Cottrell arrested that night.

34

ANSE COTTRELL walked the floor of his office tortured by anxiety. He had intended to recover his revolver after killing LePage, but he had fired too soon and let him escape. Half the men in town were hunting him. If he was shot down resisting arrest that would be fine, but if he surrendered and talked it would be awkward. The weapon that had destroyed the jailor could be identified as belonging to Anse and it would be hard to explain how it came into the possession of LePage since of course he must have been searched after his arrest. The story of an outlaw such as Clint could be discredited to a certain extent but there were some supporting facts that would be suspicious. Another thing that worried him was the disappearance of Anita Jelks. He had made some discreet inquiries but apparently nobody had seen her leave town.

He heard footsteps on the porch and stopped for a moment to listen. Somebody was coming into the house. His state of mind was so disturbed that this startled him, though probably it was no intruder but one of his relatives. He eased the revolver in its scabbard to make sure of an easy draw if necessary.

When Cully Ducret walked into the room he was relieved. He had never confided any dangerous secrets to the Texan and the man was faithful as an old hound dog. Anse slumped down into a chair at his desk.

“Have they caught Clint yet?” he asked.

“Randolph Sloan killed him.” The gambler’s inscrutable face was empty of expression.

“I wish it had been the other way round,” Cottrell said in a burst of hatred.

“Yes, you would have liked that.” Ducret’s bleak eyes rested on the old man watchfully. “It was with your gun Clint killed Malvern. How did he get it?”

Cottrell showed astonishment. He glanced at the wall and appeared surprised the revolver was no longer there. “I never missed it till now,” he said. “Somebody must have stolen it.”

“Nobody stole it,” Ducret answered, his voice quiet and very cold. “You gave it to him.”

Anse was alarmed. He changed his story at once. “That is true. I can tell you because you will understand. The Sloans were going to frame Clint and I helped him to escape. I gave him the .45, but I cautioned him to use it only as a threat. He was a fool, but he was one of our friends and I had to stand by him.”

“You freed him to kill him so that he wouldn’t talk.”

Cottrell felt the muscles tighten under his heart. “You ought to know me better than that, Cully,” he said.

“You had me fooled a long time,” Ducret told him. “I knew you were hard and revengeful and crazy for money, but I didn't know you were the kind would rat on one of your own crowd. You used me for a cat's-paw all these years while I kept you alive and you got other men to do the dirty work you knew better than to ask of me. You are too evil to live."

There were tiny beads of perspiration on Cottrell's forehead. "You're talking foolishness, Cully. We have been friends for years, you and I. No man ever lived more loyal to his friends than I."

"You gave LePage three hundred dollars to kill Joe Tubbs and tonight you lay in wait to murder Clint. Before he died he accused you of wounding him."

"He must have been out of his head, Cully."

"I read tonight the statement of a witness who saw you shoot Dan Duff."

Cottrell felt inside him a dreadful crawling fear. "Some liar paid by the Sloans," he croaked.

The Texan's low voice sounded like inexorable doom to the cowering man. "A posse is on its way now to arrest you for the murder of Duff. You're finished."

"I'll get a lawyer. I'll prove——"

Ducret cut his protest short. "No, you won't get a lawyer, Anse. I know yore slimy ways. You would wriggle out of this somehow. It has struck twelve o'clock for you. Two men were killed at the Box S last night, one of them yore nephew. You murdered them. You got me to lead that posse. That was a mistake. I've been told you had it arranged that if we took prisoners they wouldn't reach town alive."

"No — no!" Cottrell cried. "Listen to me, Cully. You have got this all wrong."

"I have listened to you too long," the Texan answered. "It's a showdown. But I'm not like you. I'll give you a chance. I am going to back to the other end of the room. While I am doing it get out yore cutter and go to smoking."

"Wait, Cully, wait. I haven't a gun on me. Don't do this, for God's sake." Cottrell's agitated words rose almost to a scream.

"Don't lie to me. You always pack a gun." Ducret was backing away slowly. His arms hung by his sides.

"Look. I'll show you." Anse tore open his coat. His hand moved to prove what he had said and came out gripping a revolver.

Ducret was watching him closely. It was said that no man in the West had so quick a draw as this Texan. The .45 was in his hand and blazing before Cottrell had pulled the trigger.

The weapon dropped from the hand of Anse. He had been shot through the heart but his body remained seated in the chair. When the posse of three arrived fifteen minutes later to arrest him the slumped figure was still erect.

Ducret was at the livery stable saddling his horse. It would be a long ride before he reached the border.

35

MATT CHUNN knocked at Nora Hamilton's door. "I got some news for you love birds," his falsetto voice announced.

Randy opened for him. "Come in, Matt. Be the first to congratulate me."

"Hmp!" the old man snorted. It was to Nora that he spoke. "So you got him."

"Yes," she answered, smiling at him. "If he doesn't rue back."

"I told you once, Nora, that I am a rock of Gibralter," Randy said. "The first day we met."

"Yes." She slanted a supremely happy smile at him. "But I don't mind confessing to Matt that I am very glad Julia Cottrell is to be married so soon."

"She'll have to wear mourning at her wedding, I reckon," Matt mentioned.

"What do you mean?" Randy asked.

"Old Anse got himself killed about an hour ago," Matt told them nonchalantly.

"Killed. Who killed him?"

"You'll be surprised. That quiet gent from Texas — Cully Ducret. Plumb through the heart. Anse had his gun out. Ducret told Monty Norris when he went down to the corral to saddle his horse. He's lit out. An unnecessary journey, I would say. The old devil had it coming."

Randy remembered the Texan's murmured words, *He has lived too long.* He guessed that Ducret had shot him for his treachery.

"You can sleep in peace now, both of you. The war is over." Matt spoke to Randy severely. "You quit hellin' around, young fellow, and treat Miss Nora right."

Randy grinned. "I'm just bustin' with good resolutions, Matt."

"See you keep them. I introduced you to this girl and I feel responsible."

"Randy will treat me right, Matt," Nora told him with shining eyes. "If we live together fifty years there will never be a day I won't be glad I married him."

A rash prophecy, but it proved true.

THE END

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continued from front flap

land made valuable by the fact that the railroad was set to move into the area. However, Randy was not one to take wrongs lying down, and with "jingling spurs" and head high he faced an almost impossible situation.

When Sumner was released from prison the guns roared again. The Sloan clan rallied to the support of the brothers, and so did other friends, weary of Anse Cottrell's greed and high-handedness. Among those who helped Randy were Julia Cottrell, a daughter of Old Anse, and Nora Hamilton, a young woman with a questionable past, whom Randy found exciting and loyal.

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